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“I must pause here for cheering”:

Transtextuality and Possible Worlds Theory Applied to *The Death Gate Cycle*

Abstract

In this thesis, I examine how authors Weis and Hickman approach transtextuality and possible worlds narrative in order to comment on the genre of fantasy and on 1990s American social anxieties in their fantasy dystopian series *The Death Gate Cycle*. It is a close reading genre study of all seven novels in the aforementioned series which I analyze using Gérard Genette's theory of transtextuality and Marie-Laure Ryan's theory of possible worlds. I analyze how hypertextuality and intertextuality are present in the series and how these support the series' narrative, genre commentary, and social commentary. Then I analyze how the social commentary is woven into the intertextuality and the dystopian storytelling, as well as how it connects to the context of 1990s America. I also go into the epitext surrounding the authors, such as author interviews, to solidify my analysis on these points. Finally, I briefly comment on the reception that the series has had on its readers to close up the examination of the reader effects of said use of intertextuality and dystopian elements.

On the hypertextual level, *The Death Gate Cycle* parodies Tolkien's work by writing the series on the pretense that it is a scholarly document. Writing the series like this also enhances reader immersion as it works with the pretense that this nonactual world functions as its own actual world. Further, on the intertextual level, *The Death Gate Cycle* references many pop culture phenomena through the character of Zifnab. References to Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, the *Dungeons & Dragons* tabletop roleplaying game, *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, James Bond, and the *Dragonlance* series are mentioned. The reason Zifnab makes these references is because he is well read in popular Earth culture from our time, at the time of publication. It is a complex use of intertextuality that weaves it together with the series' greater narrative, worldbuilding, and also with its themes and social commentaries—while still being a nod to readers who are as well versed in popular fantasy and science fiction media as Weis and Hickman are.

The social commentary of the Mensch versus non-Mensch narrative in the series is a way of commenting on the issue of superior versus inferior races, even alluding to language that is drawing allusions to the idea of the Übermensch that was adopted into Nazi ideology. Another dystopian social commentary narrative is the fact that the world of *The Death Gate Cycle*, back when it was still the Earth, was changed by a nuclear

holocaust. Additionally, global warming social commentary rears its head right at the end of the series, another common trope in dystopian genre media, as well as another modern anxiety. The world of *The Death Gate Cycle* has been destroyed many times over, resulting in dystopia after dystopia until the point in time where the story of the series begins. The narrative also involves a dystopian social commentary that takes the idea of industrial indoctrination and takes it to its utmost extreme, in the form of religious indoctrination. A warning not to worship false gods, and a mocking of industrial and religious power structures in this narrative of unionizing against slavery and oppression. The dwarf Limbeck forbids the use of the word "Geg" to describe dwarves. This is a commentary on the way the American Civil Rights Movement shifted from using the word "negroes" to the word "black" to the phrase "African American" to refer to themselves. These narratives are not so much future predictions as they are social commentaries on elements of the 1990s current American and Western issues and tendencies.

The Death Gate Cycle did some extraordinary things with intertextuality and with a fantastical dystopian possible worlds narrative. It uses these to comment on religion, racism, slavery, industrialism, unionizing, science, war, and climate change from a 1990s American point of view. The series also uses these as a genre commentary by *s*ubverting the typical expectations for a Tolkienesque fantasy epic and turning it dystopian. But *The Death Gate Cycle* is more a product of its culture, rather than having had any great influence or impact upon it. It was not the next *The Lord of the Rings* or *Harry Potter*, in that it did not change public perception of fantasy literature in any way. It is considered by fans to be an underrated fantasy series—an obscure 1990s gem in an oversaturated market that pumps out fantasy series after fantasy series.

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Introduction

"We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it. The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely. All art is quite useless." (Wilde 4) Sometimes, you come across a fictional work that leaves a lasting effect on you, and you want to examine and discuss why that is. And sometimes, said object of your attention remains in obscurity—so I cannot justify the writing of this study on the basis of said work's popularity or overall cultural significance. In fact, it seems to me that this particular work is more a product of its culture, rather than having any great influence or impact upon it.

This series is called *The Death Gate Cycle*, authored by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman; It was originally published in America from 1990 to 1994. *Dragon Wing*, *Elven Star*, *Fire Sea*, *Serpent Mage*, *The Hand of Chaos*, *Into the Labyrinth*, and *The Seventh Gate* are the seven novels that make up the series, in that order. For those who are unfamiliar: It is an epic fantasy dystopian story that follows a split Earth, divided into a number of new worlds in an effort to rebuild it after it was ravaged by a nuclear holocaust. The race that destroyed and rebuilt the world are called the Sartan, and the event was dubbed "the Sundering." The Sartan split it up into four realms based on the four basic elements: the worlds of water, air, fire, and stone. They also created a fifth world, The Labyrinth, in which to imprison their enemies, a race called the Patryns. These five distinct fantasy worlds are the stage of this play, in which many characters take part. Of these characters are the Mensch races, as they are called by the Sartans and Patryns: These races include your typical humans, elves, and dwarves. The Mensch races are viewed as "lesser" by the Sartans and Patryns because their magic is so much stronger than any magic the Mensch races can produce.

I will perform a genre study of this less known fantasy novel series that I think will be appropriate of an analysis with a combined transtextual theory and possible worlds theory. I believe the effect of transtextuality with a multiple worlds narrative hand in hand strengthens the overall narrative, ideologies, and themes of *The Death Gate Cycle* in an extraordinary manner. Firstly, the authors of *The Death Gate Cycle* make references to other texts in the form of intertextuality and hypertextuality, which is both commenting on the fantasy and dystopian genre while simultaneously working in duality with the

authors' social commentary. Which brings me to my second point of analysis: The way in which the authors of *The Death Gate Cycle* have created a fictional future in order to comment on the present day at the time of writing. These two, that being the intertextual references and the possible worlds commentary, support each other in such a way that my cultural text study needs the combined frameworks and philosophies of both Gérard Genette's transtextual theories and Marie-Laure Ryan's theories of possible worlds.

I shall then further study this series' epitext, such as interviews with the authors, the authors' previous work experiences, as well as other relevant biographical information. This approach is *inspired* by the philosophies of new historicism, but new historicism is much easier to apply with works of deceased authors, so it will not be fully new historicist, rather, I will simply use the paratextual evidence (the epitext) as further proof of my intertextual and hypertextual arguments, as well as a springboard into a supporting analysis of the contexts of this series' narratives—especially concerning religion, hypertextuality, and intertextuality.

After which I will very briefly touch on the reader effects of the aspects of the series that I have analyzed so far, such as the genre history and the intertextual references of *The Death Gate Cycle*. For this, I have selected excerpts from a few community reviews by readers on *Goodreads* to represent some of the tendencies found in the readers' receptions.

The Death Gate Cycle comments on many modern anxieties such as industrialization, class struggles, racism, fascism, slavery, religion, nuclear war, and global warming. But how, you may ask, does all of this connect to transtextual theory and possible worlds theory? Well, allow me to further elaborate in the following study.

The goal of my analysis of *The Death Gate Cycle* is twofold: To examine the "future"—and therefore the "now"—that the novels are commenting upon, and to examine how this series approaches genre history using transtextual references.

Theory

Transtextuality

I will be analyzing *The Death Gate Cycle* using translations of French theorist Gérard Genette's intertextual works, *The Architext: An Introduction*, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, and "Introduction to the Paratext." They are more colloquially known

as *The Architext*, *Palimpsests*, and *Paratexts*. But first, I will briefly recount the history of the term “intertextuality.”

Transtextuality incorporates intertextuality under its umbrella, but it also encompasses so much more than just intertextuality, which is the reason it is the main theory of choice for this particular thesis. Still, transtextuality has its roots in the history of intertextuality. The core philosophy of intertextuality is commonly described as the idea that all texts are connected to each other. We can prove this by finding the intertextual relations from one text to another, or in other words, by finding the ways in which one text refers to or incorporates aspects of another text. (Allen 6, Baker & Ellece 64, Baldick “Intertextuality”, Bruce “Interetextuality”, Cavanagh et al. 716, Culler 33, Friis 143, Klages 44, Matthews “Intertextuality”, Orr 21-27) Study guides to intertextuality typically reference the same canon of intertextual theorists, who together make up the philosophy of intertextuality: Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes, with the help of Ferdinand de Saussure and Mikhail Bakhtin. (Allen 8-60, Bruce “Intertextuality”, Cavanagh et al. 716, Friis 143-145, Klages 44, Orr 6)

Firstly, Saussure is credited as the forefather of linguistic theory, as he is the originator of the idea of semiology, also known as the study of signs. (Allen 8-9) Semiology birthed the idea that communication happens within a system of signs, and that the meanings of our chosen words comes from this system of language, not from within ourselves. We are simply birthed into this pre-existing system from which we choose our words and meanings. (ibid. 9) “Signs […] only possess what meaning they do possess because of their […] relation to other signs. No sign has a meaning of its own. Signs exist within a system and produce meaning through their similarity to and difference from other signs.” (ibid. 10) According to Allen, this birthed the set of ideas that would eventually give shape to the theory of intertextuality. (ibid.)

The other literary theorist who can be credited as an influence upon the view of language that eventually birthed the theory of intertextuality is, as mentioned, Bakhtin.

> Bakhtin […] is far more concerned than Saussure with the social contexts within which words are exchanged. If the relational nature of the word for Saussure stems from a vision of language seen as a generalized and abstract system, for Bakhtin it stems from the word’s existence within

> specific social sites, specific social registers and specific moments of utterance and reception. (Allen 10-11)

Bakhtin introduced the idea that "the word in language is half someone else's. It becomes one's "own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intentions, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention." (Bakhtin 328) It is Allen's opinion that both Saussure and Bakhtin have influenced Julia Kristeva in her invention of the term "intertextuality." This is because these ideas already introduced some of the ideas and beliefs that intertextuality would later inhabit.

Thirdly, according to Allen, Roland Barthes is credited as the most articulate advocate of the idea that the text is no longer the product of an author's original thoughts but "a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (Allen 13, Barthes 52). He articulates this idea in his oft-referenced essay "The Death of the Author." The concept of intertextuality does indeed present the author as unoriginal, as one who can only imitate and mix writings. Theorists have since considered Barthes' view of language an intertextual one. (Allen 14) The goal of Barthes' essay was to argue that authorial intent and biographical context will result in a limited analysis of a text, and that time had come for the reader to kill the author and connect the duplicitous meanings of the text—that the text's meaning is not found in its production, but in its reception. (Barthes 53-54) Allen argues, as mentioned, that the theory of intertextuality follows this idea of the text. Bakhtin's work, however, centers on the use of language in social situations, whereas Kristeva's work is more focused on rather more abstract ideas of text and textuality. (Allen 36)

And, finally, we come to the actual inception of the term "intertextuality" in Kristeva's work, as she is the one who first coined and used the term. "Kristeva implies, ideas are not presented as finished, consumable products, but are presented in such a way as to encourage readers themselves to step into the production of meaning." (Allen 34) The meaning of texts is now, in the spirit of the death of the author, the object of study of both the author, reader, and analyst in a continual process. The text can then go through many ongoing transformations and may never stop being processed. (ibid.)

> In 'The Bounded Text' Kristeva is concerned with establishing the manner in which a text is constructed out of already existent discourse. Authors do

> not create their texts from their own original minds, but rather compile them from pre-existent texts […] Texts are made up of what is at times styled 'the cultural (or social) text', all the different discourses, ways of speaking and saying, institutionally sanctioned structures and systems which make up what we call culture. In this sense, the text is not an individual, isolated object, but, rather, a compilation of cultural textuality. Individual text and the cultural text are made from the same textual material and cannot be separated from each other. (ibid. 35-36)

The core idea here is that all texts are the site of a struggle between the ideologies that we know from society and its discourses. (ibid. 36) "Kristeva's semiotic approach seeks to study the text as a textual arrangement of elements which possess a double meaning: a meaning in the text itself and a meaning in what she calls 'the historical and social text'." (ibid. 37)

Kristeva's intertextual theory also centers around the idea of the ideologeme, that is, the presence of social conflicts and tensions within the texts. This can be the whole text itself or it can be specific words or parts of the text which are the subject of this on-going cultural and social process of meaning-making. Words like "natural", which we are still to this day conflicted about the meaning of, present an ideologeme. (Allen 36-37) Basically, an ideologeme takes readers outside the text to the ideological representations of an idea. It makes it impossible for the reader to remain inside the novel. And it will usually be part of a discourse in society or culture that the author did not invent. So, the meaning of a text is always both 'inside' and yet 'outside' that text. (ibid. 38) That is all on the history of the theory of the term "intertextuality."

I now move on to my main theorist of interest, Genette, whose theory of transtextuality will permeate through my close reading analysis of *The Death Gate Cycle*. Gérard Genette, whose terms I will be borrowing for this study, is one who turns these intertextual philosophies into more workable textual theories. Underneath the umbrella term of transtextuality, Genette has formulated a list of five terms with which you may conduct a structural transtextual analysis: *intertextuality*, *paratextuality*, *metatextuality*, *hypertextuality*, and *architextuality*. Before I describe them in more detail, note that all of them can be understood simultaneously as aspects of any textuality and as textual

categories (*Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* 8). Lastly, they may also overlap (ibid. 7).

Intertextuality. According to Genette, intertextuality is included under transtextuality as the strict and literal presence of a text within another text, of which quotation "is the most obvious example of this type of function" (*The Architext: An Introduction* 81-82). Another form of intertextuality is, according to Genette, known as plagiarism, or "an undeclared but still literal borrowing" (*Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* 2). Its third form is allusion, that is, in Genette's words: "an enunciation whose full meaning presupposes the perception of a relationship between it and another text, to which it necessarily refers by some inflections that would otherwise remain unintelligible." (*Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* 2)

Paratextuality. Confusingly, paratextuality is described as what would later be known as hypertextuality in *The Architext: An Introduction*, but in "Introduction to the Paratext", Genette very clearly defines the paratext. Under the umbrella term of the paratext, Genette coins the term *peritext*, which includes "the title or the preface, and sometimes inserted into the interstices of the text, like the titles of chapters or certain notes" ("Introduction to the Paratext" 263). The paratext also covers the *epitext*, which is considered interviews and conversations with the media, private letters, journals, and other documents by the author. (Allen 103, "Introduction to the Paratext" 264)

Metatextuality. This is for things like literary criticism, such as this thesis itself. Genette explains metatextuality as: "the transtextual relationship that links a commentary to the text it comments on" (*The Architext: An Introduction* 81-82). Essentially, it is just that, any references within a text that makes it a commentary on another text. This differs from hypertextuality in that it is not an imitation of another text, but a commentary upon it. It is, ironically, the least important of all the categories for the aim of this study.

Hypertextuality. This term is the focus of Genette's work, *Palimpsests*. It involves "any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the *hypertext*) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the *hypotext*), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary." (*Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* 5) In other words, the art of imitation, under which things like pastiche and parody fall. (*The Architext: An Introduction* 82, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* 24-29) It is the rewriting

of the already written (Allen 107-108), although it may not speak of or cite from the text it originates from and transforms (*Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* 5). Note that all literary works evoke some other literary work to some extent and depending on how you read it. The hypertextuality of any work is dependent on the judgment of the reader. (ibid. 9) In summary, Genette lists six types of hypertextual practices, or six types of transformation and imitation: playful, humorous, serious, polemical, satiric, and ironic. (ibid. 24-29) He also defines the difference between parody and imitation very succinctly as such: "One can parody only particular texts; one can imitate only a genre (a corpus, no matter how narrow, that is treated as a genre)—for the simple reason, which has been clear to all from the start, that *to imitate is to generalize*." (ibid. 85) To summarize, text B is a transformation of text A, and therefore, unable to exist without text A, from which it originates. (ibid. 5)

Architextuality. This is the chief term of study in Genette's work, *The Architext: An Introduction*. This type of transtextuality is concerned with "that relationship of inclusion that links each text to the various types of discourse it belongs to" (*The Architext: An Introduction* 82); more specifically, Genette is speaking of the text's relationship with genre, mode, and overall discourse. The architext is outside the text, connecting it to discourses such as theories of genre. These discourses are called architexture. That is what Genette means when he says that architexture is the relationship between a text and its architext, which connects the text to a network of achitexture. (ibid. 83) It is, according to Genette himself, the most abstract and implicit of all the five types of transtextuality, as it is often articulated only in the paratext. The text itself should not know its generic quality as a novel or poem; Genette proclaims that "determining the generic status of the text is not the business of the text but that of the reader" (*Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* 4).

This type of structural theoretical approach to textual analysis is exactly what my study of *The Death Gate Cycle* needs because I do believe that this series applies transtextuality to its narratives and themes in an extraordinary way. Genette's theoretical foundations of transtextuality, and especially intertextuality, paratextuality, and hypertextuality, will aid me in my examination of how this series approaches genre history.

Possible Worlds

I will be analyzing *The Death Gate Cycle* using Marie-Laure Ryan's theory of possible worlds, which is neatly outlined in her article "From Parallel Universes to Possible Worlds: Ontological Pluralism in Physics, Narratology, and Narrative." Her theory can be applied both as a way to look at how we read stories in general *and* as a tool to talk about science-fiction and fantasy stories that utilize a multiple worlds narrative. Both usages of the theory are applicable to *The Death Gate Cycle*, though not equally relevant to the main goal of my analysis.

Marie-Laure Ryan, in her article, begins with an overview of multiple realities theory in physics, after which she introduces its literary counterpart: multiple realities in narrative theory, known as possible worlds theory (Ryan M-L. 633-652). The idea behind possible worlds theory is this: Reality is a universe that encompasses a number of worlds. Our world, the "actual" world, is the one we live in—and by "we" I mean myself and whoever is currently reading this thesis, as well as the remainder of all human beings and living things in the real world. The actual world is "at the center" of this universe that *is* reality. That is, our observable reality. The actual world, the center, is "surrounded by worlds that are possible but not actual." (ibid. 644-645) All these other worlds that are "not actual" are "the product of a mental activity, such as dreaming, imagining, foretelling, promising, or storytelling." (ibid. 645) This is the idea that possible worlds theory bases its view of fiction upon. We know that fictional worlds are produced by an author, so we relate to these fictional worlds as *nonactual possible worlds*. The fictional world is "its own actual world" (ibid. 646), in the sense that it is made to *feel* real, though it is still only fiction. I repeat, the fictional story's world is a nonactual world, and our world is the actual world. We *pretend* that it is real. (ibid.) This is the core philosophy of possible worlds theory.

And here is how I plan to apply said theory to my analysis, or, how Ryan proposes to use possible worlds theory in general literary analysis: "For narratologists, possible worlds can be treated as what is known in philosophy as a theoretical fiction (an imaginary entity postulated for its explanatory power)" (ibid. 652) That is to say, *The Death Gate Cycle* will be treated as a form of theoretical fiction. Possible worlds theory, as it is theorized by Ryan, believes that stories are fabrications made by human beings in

response to something, be it another text, work of art, some area of discourse, or life in general. We interpret stories in the same way that we interpret the behavior of the people around us, because stories are a way to organize the human experience. According to Ryan, that is. (ibid. 647) Which is going to be the running literary philosophy for my genre analysis of *The Death Gate Cycle*: The story of Weis and Hickman's multiple worlds narrative provides a powerful dramatized "what if" story that organizes the human experience in an interesting way.

These notions fall in line with my overall goal for this study, in the sense that I wish to, as mentioned, examine the "future"—and therefore the "now"—that the novels are commenting upon. Social commentary such as this, which I may call "theoretical fiction" as per Ryan's vocabulary, is not uncommon in both fantasy and science fiction dystopian stories.

Architextuality (or Genre History)

I will be discussing the architextuality and genre history of *The Death Gate Cycle*, which will need a mix of intertextual knowledge of the dystopian and fantasy genre as well as a bit of architextual knowledge of the discourse of genre in general.

Genette discusses genre and its relationship with architexture thoroughly in *The Architext: An Introduction*. He gives an extensive overview of genre history and discourse dating all the way back to Aristotle. I will not need a full summary of the history of genre discourse for my particular study. A genre in the literary sense is a well-established and recognizable categorization of the literary text. (Baldick "genre") And genre fiction is "the kind of story that offers readers more or less what they would expect upon the basis of having read similar books before" (Baldick "genre fiction"). Figuring out the genre of a work presupposes that the reader already possesses some intertextual knowledge in order for them to engage in the discourse of genre. (Frow 7) *The Death Gate Cycle* belongs to the fantasy and dystopian genre, as will soon become abundantly evident in the analysis.

Dystopian Genre. Dystopian literature allows us to view our present-day reality as history. (Jameson 153, Williams 208) Exactly like Ryan's possible worlds theory, dystopian stories are a reaction to ideas, issues, topics, and current trends that the author has extrapolated into an imagined world where these phenomena or ideologies that are

present in our current society are seen in their exaggerated form. Dystopias, then, reveal conflicts in the current world by viewing the present as history. It should be mentioned that, according to Jameson, only the willed transformation is truly utopian or dystopian (Jameson 205). If the world of the story had not been willfully changed by human effort in some attempt to change the world, it is not a true dystopia. (ibid. 203) Where a typical genre analysis of dystopian fiction might use Frederic Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* (Jameson 148), I will instead use the comparable philosophies of Ryan's possible worlds theory. *Both* theories connect the text to the real-life context that it is written in response to.

Fantasy Genre. Referring back to the theory of possible worlds, we interpret fantasy literature in much the same way, and Ryan even mentions franchises like *Harry Potter* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* as examples of classical wormhole narratives, specifically, "narratives that present their multiple worlds as having always existed side by side" (Ryan 659), for example. Multiple worlds stories, dystopian literature, and fantasy literature all comment on the present and on phenomena from the actual world. Where dystopian literature is about the future, fantasy literature can be placed outside of historical time. According to Andrew Rayment, "Fantasy is essentially backwards looking in the sense that the secondary space is always less technologically advanced than the late twentieth century/early twenty-first century world of our experience" (Rayment 17). By the way, "secondary space" is just another way of referring to fictional worlds as a "nonactual world". (ibid. 16) Nevertheless, the point is that the dystopian genre has a very unique relationship with history, in that dystopian literature always places our present in the past, while fantasy literature is a bit looser in its relationship with history, often preferring less technologically advanced worlds. Fantasy narratives present a nonactual possible world that likewise organizes the human experience in an interesting way through their use of fantasy.

What I mean by fantasy narratives' use of "fantasy" is their use of the fantasy element. According to *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, fantasy is:

> A general term for any kind of fictional work that is not primarily devoted to realistic representation of the known world. The category includes

> several literary genres [...] describing imagined worlds in which magical powers and other impossibilities are accepted. (Baldick "fantasy")

The Death Gate Cycle is, by all definitions, fantasy literature. This will become evident in the analysis as well.

I wish to return to these discussions of architextuality in my study of *The Death Gate Cycle* both in my close reading analysis of the intertextual parts of the novels and in my possible worlds analysis. Additionally, I wish to briefly discuss the genre discourse present in community reader spaces.

Epitext (or New Historicism)

I will be using a generalized new historicist approach to my examination and discussion of *The Death Gate Cycle* which will, in fact, be more of a paratextual analysis on the series' epitext. As things stand, the paratextual evidence to back up my claims are not substantial enough that the scope of this study can be truly new historicist.

The basic tenet of new historicism is the inclusion of the text's associated social and cultural contexts within the literary analysis (Kjældgaard 437, Ryan 154, Schmitz 160, Veeser xi). Study guides will consistently agree that Stephen Greenblatt is the originator of new historicism (Kjældgaard 437, Ryan 154, Schmitz 159, Veeser xiv). In "Towards a Poetics of Culture", Greenblatt declares: "the work of art is the product of a negotiation between a creator or class of creators, equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society." (Veeser 12) I insist that such a negotiation between the creators and the institutions and practices of society are to be found in *The Death Gate Cycle*. But the evidence that I can draw from to prove this may be a bit controversial to a true new historicist:

"[Historical evidence] gives us one possible standard of historical truth to measure our work against. And it provides us with a handy rule of thumb in our interpretive work: if you cannot justify a claim with historical evidence, do not make it." (Ryan M. 155) The type of evidence I can draw from in my analysis to prove that the creators of the text were influenced by certain social and cultural contexts that are being directly negotiated within the text, which is closest to the principles of new historicism, is paratextual evidence. Author interviews and other such paratextual evidence, more specifically, the epitext, will be able to directly, and most believably, support my claims

that the text is a negotiation between its creators and the institutions and practices of society.

I also believe there to be a lot of other types of evidence of a connection from the text to the historical context that its creators lived through. Other than the epitext, the text itself directly indicates nonfictional phenomena, such as historical events, issues, topics, or ideas that were present or known of at the time of writing. In which case, it is fairly easy to prove—or to assume—that the creators must have known about said context. The proof is in the text.

The reason for the fact that this study is only using a new historicist-*inspired* approach, however, is that the publishing date of *The Death Gate Cycle* is not far enough away for there to really be enough paratextual evidence to show completely unquestionable connections between text and context. Or, at least, not enough evidence to prove whether the creators *intended* said connections. The thing is, in order for a new historicist analysis to work, I ideally ought to be able to prove that the creators knew of the historical contexts I am claiming must be the context that the text is negotiating. There will be examples of this in the analysis, where I make a connection to a historical event, group, or idea based on my analysis of the text, which neither Weis nor Hickman have yet admitted having known of as they wrote the series. Hence, why this analysis is only inspired by new historicism, not *truly* new historicist.

Analysis

Intertextuality Analysis Begins

The first part of this chapter of the analysis deals with the hypertextuality aspect of *The Death Gate Cycle* first, and the remainder of the **Intertextuality Analysis** will be focusing entirely on intertextual references found in the series. The **Intertextuality Analysis** spans over both an analysis of the architextuality concerning the fantasy and dystopian elements of *The Death Gate Cycle*. However, in **Architextuality: Dystopia**, the **Intertextuality Analysis** will end, and the **Possible Worlds Analysis** will begin. For now, I shall establish that *The Death Gate Cycle* is filled with hypertextual and intertextual references to popular fantasy media—as well as briefly touch on how that affects the reader.

Architextuality: Fantasy

The Death Gate Cycle is loaded with hypertextual and intertextual references to popular fantasy media, such as Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* series, the *Dungeons & Dragons* tabletop roleplaying franchise, including the associated *Dragonlance* series. The purpose of these for the overall narrative may not be immediately clear, but the parodying and references do serve many purposes, architextually, narratively, and thematically.

Much like *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Death Gate Cycle* is written as if it is a scholarly document; and the resemblance, I would argue, is hypertextual. J. R. R. Tolkien, author of said trilogy, has explained his storyworld as: "Middle-earth is not an imaginary world. […] The theatre of my tale is this earth, the one in which we now live, but the historical period is imaginary." (Tolkien *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* 239) The same idea is true for Weis and Hickman's fantasy dystopian series: *The Death Gate Cycle* is also an epic fantasy story whose world is that of the earth that we know, but in an imagined period of history. I shall further prove that this is likely an intended hypertextual parody of Tolkien later on in my analysis, under the heading of **Epitext**, but the fact of the matter currently is what I said in the opening statement: *The Death Gate Cycle* is written as if it is a scholarly document, much like the pioneering fantasy trilogy by Tolkien.

The Death Gate Cycle has many footnotes much like a scholarly document would, such as on page 8 of *Dragon Wing*: "[2]The barl is the main standard of exchange in both elven and human lands. It is measured in the traditional barrel of water. An equivalent exchange for a barrel of water is one barl." (Weis and Hickman) This footnote is attached to the first mention of the "barl" currency in the story, on the same page. Every book in the series has footnotes, and some pages have several, such as page 401 in *Fire Sea* and page 1 of *The Hand of Chaos*. The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy does also make use of footnotes, for example in its prologue, "*Concerning Hobbits*" (Tolkien *The Fellowship of the Ring* 4, 14-15). Both usages of footnotes, in *The Death Gate Cycle* and in *The Lord of the Rings*, serve the purpose of further fleshing out the lore and details of the world in a way that fits the narrative of these books that are pretending to be "scholarly documents." Another purpose for mimicking scholarly footnotes like this is to create a narrative of credibility for the story. This should, ideally, affect and heighten reader immersion.

Every book in the series, save for the last two books (*Into the Labyrinth* and *The Seventh Gate*), also feature maps of the world, its kingdoms, and prominent vehicles. *The Lord of the Rings* also features a map of Middle-earth (Tolkien *The Fellowship of the Ring* 409). Every book in *The Death Gate Cycle*, bar none, features musical scores of the featured songs in the appendices after the epilogue has concluded. Tolkien's work often featured songs, and characters were wont to break out into singing often. And all of the books in *The Death Gate Cycle*, as mentioned, feature appendices. Page 418 to 430 of *Dragon Wing* explains the magic system, pages 361 to 367 of *Elven Star* explain Patryn runes, pages 403 to 410 in *Fire Sea* explain necromancy, *Seprent Mage* has three appendices from page 415 to 436, *The Hand of Chaos* also has three appendices from page 447 to page 465, *Into the Labyrinth* has two appendices (442-451), and *The Seventh Gate* likewise has two appendices. (Weis and Hickman) Once more, *The Lord of the Rings* also contain appendices, such as the aforementioned prologue "*Concerning Hobbits*" (Tolkien *The Fellowship of the Ring* 1). Again, the purpose of these is to flesh out the fantasy world—not outside the narrative but inside the narrative, yet still in a way that is paratextual. This communicates to readers that the parts of the nonactual world that they are privy to through the storytelling is only a small part of a bigger nonactual world, which aids the reader in pretending that this world is its own actual world, despite being a work of fiction. It also communicates the genre very clearly, it being a Tolkien-like fantasy epic.

These appendices invite the reader to suspend their disbelief. They are written by the authors in order to further their narrative of these books being scholarly documents and retellings of found historical texts, such as personal journals written by the books' main characters, surrounding the larger "historical event" that the series are chronicling. Many of them pretend to have been authored by the story's characters, such as Alfred and Haplo, and then translated by whoever pieced together these books that chronicle the events concerning *The Death Gate Cycle*. Again, this seems like a hypertextual parody of Tolkien's fantasy trilogy, which I will bring up again later. For now, I cannot prove that this hypertextual relation is anything other than a random similarity I, as the analyst, has found. In fact, for now all I have *really* proven is that it is a hypertextual imitation of the epic fantasy subgenre rather than a parody of Tolkien *specifically*. I will need more

evidence for that, such as intertextual references to Tolkien's work and author interviews with Weis or Hickman (see analysis chapter named **Epitext**). Indeed, I can provide both, once of which I can provide immediately.

There are many other hints in *The Death Gate Cycle* to the fantasy genre in general, though they are more intertextual than they are hypertextual in nature: The character of Zifnab makes many pop-culture references to other fantasy media, such as mentions of Gandalf and Smaug from the aforementioned Tolkien works. First, Gandalf.

> "'Don't meddle in the affairs of wizards,'" he said in lofty tones, "'for they are subtle and quick to anger.' A fellow sorcerer said that. Good at his job, knew a lot about jewelry. Not bad at fireworks, either. Wasn't the snappy dresser Merlin was, though. Let's see, what his name? […] Gand-something or other…" (Weis and Hickman *Elven Star* 114)

The first line, spoken by Zifnab, is a direct quotation of Gandalf from *The Fellowship of the Ring* by J. R. R. Tolkien: "*Do not meddle in the affairs of Wizards, for they are subtle and quick to anger.*" (Tolkien *The Fellowship of the Ring* 84) Besides, Gandalf's name is jokingly only partially spelled out as "Gand-something or other…" (Weis and Hickman *Elven Star* 114) as an allusion. Not to mention, him knowing "a lot about jewelry" (Weis and Hickman *Elven Star* 114) is another allusion to the One Ring, and Gandalf had made a firework show for Bilbo's 111th birthday (Tolkien *The Fellowship of the Ring* "A Long Expected Party"), hence why Zifnab says Gandalf was "not bad at fireworks, either." (Weis and Hickman *Elven Star* 114) The crazed wizard character of Zifnab makes many more intertextual references like this to the wizard Gandalf. The line "Fly, you fools!" (Weis and Hickman *Elven Star* 333, Tolkien *The Fellowship of the Ring* 331) is even directly quoted. Smaug as well is referenced in association with the dragon that follows Zifnab around: "You must have him confused with someone else—Smaug, perhaps?" (Weis and Hickman *Elven Star* 284) Smaug from *The Hobbit*, that is. This intertextual link alone, without even any paratextual evidence to back it up, establishes a connection between this series and Tolkien's work, as was mentioned before. Readers who go into reading *The Death Gate Cycle* with intertextual foreknowledge of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* will recognize the references and likely appreciate the parody.

Other intertextual references to popular fantasy works made by the mad wizard Zifnab also include magic spells from the *Dungeons & Dragons* tabletop roleplaying game. Zifnab often tries to remember the spell "Fireball" from *Dungeons & Dragons*.

> Why I had a spell once that would have fried your socks off. Can't think of the name offhand. Fire bell? No that's not quite it. I have it—tire sale! No, doesn't sound right, either. (Weis and Hickman *Elven Star* 61)
>
> I've the most marvelous spell. If I could just remember how it went. Eight ball! No, that's not it. Fire something. Fire… extinguisher! Smoke alarm. No. But I really think I'm getting close. (Weis and Hickman *Elven Star* 298)
>
> How did that spell go? Let's see, I need a ball of bat guano and a pinch of sulfur. No, wait. I've got my spells muddled. (Weis and Hickman *Elven Star* 114)

First, he misremembers the name of the spell as "Fire bell," "tire sale," "Eight ball," and "Fire… extinguisher!" (ibid.) Here, you may be excused for not immediately understanding the reference, since it appears in the form of allusion. Next, he makes a direct quotation to the spell as it is described in the *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook*, when he mentions the need for a "ball of bat guano and a pinch of sulfur" (ibid.): The spell "Fireball" in the game of *Dungeons & Dragons* requires a material component consisting of "a tiny ball of bat guano and sulfur" (Mearls and Crawford 241). There is a reason Weis and Hickman make references to *Dungeons & Dragons* other than as a nod to fellow fantasy fanatics, which the analysis chapter **Epitext** will explore further.

Later, Zifnab also references the *Dungeons & Dragons* cleric and fighter classes, along with the concept of hit points:

> They wanted me to be a cleric, but I refused. Party needed a healer, they said. Hah! Fighters with all the brains of a doorknob attack something twenty times their size, with a bazillion hit points, and they expect *me* to pull their heads out of their rib cages! I'm a wizard. (Weis and Hickman *Elven Star* 298)

Again, as with the previous intertextual reference, this allusion is only understandable to readers who have a preexisting knowledge of the tabletop roleplaying game of *Dungeons & Dragons*. I can practically hear the *Dungeons & Dragons* fans applauding; Because I am one, and I am doing that. But to stay within the realm of textuality, and to provide evidentiary support: “hit points” is a concept used in the game:

> Creatures with more hit points are more difficult to kill. Those with fewer hit points are more fragile. […] Whenever a creature takes damage, that damage is subtracted from its hit points. […] When you drop to 0 hit points, you either die outright or fall unconscious (Mearls and Crawford 196-197)

Cleric, fighter, and wizard are all classes you can pick to play as in the game as well, as seen in “Chapter 3: Classes” (Mearls and Crawford 45). Although *Dungeons & Dragons* uses a rulebook that I was able to connect the reference to, this type of reference is slightly more of a gaming reference than a literary one. In conclusion, the *Dungeons & Dragons* references are in abundance, and establishes an intertextual connection between this series and the popular tabletop roleplaying game—this will also be relevant later on in the section called **Epitext**.

The authors of *The Death Gate Cycle* furthermore make a few references to characters and phenomena from their previous fantasy series, *Dragonlance*. When asked for his name, Zifnab first says “Fiz—No, I can’t use that.” (Weis and Hickman *Elven Star* 69) This is a reference to a character by the name of Fizban from Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman’s previous fantasy series *Dragonlance*. I shall elaborate further on this, as well, later on, but for now, know that the character of Fizban from the *Dragonlance* novels is owned under copyright by TSR, Inc., whereas the character of Zifnab from *The Death Gate Cycle* is owned by Weis and Hickman. Hence, why the character jokingly says “No, I can’t use that.” (ibid.) This jokingly indicates that Weis and Hickman take issue with not owning the rights to a character that they have used in their previous work, even if that work was officially set in the *Dungeons & Dragons* universe, and therefore the intellectual property belongs to TSR, Inc.. It is a reference that, jokingly, highlights the legal issues of writing as a profession.

Zifnab makes other references to *Dragonlance* as well, in that bit where he mentions Gandalf and Merlin:

> A fellow sorcerer said that. Good at his job, knew a lot about jewelry. Not bad at fireworks, either. Wasn't the snappy dresser Merlin was, though. Let's see, what his name? Raist—no, that was the irritating young chap, kept hacking and spitting up blood all the time. Disgusting. The other's name was Gand-something or other… (Weis and Hickman *Elven Star* 114)

This is another intertextual allusion, this time to the character of Raistlin Majere from *Dragonlance*, who frequently coughs up blood (Weis and Hickman *Dragonlance*). There is no need for paratextual evidence to prove that the authors would have made these references on purpose, since they authored the first six novels in the *Dragonlance* novel series. It is yet another intertextual reference to the greater textuality of fantasy media, as well as being a "self-reference," so to speak.

So, *The Death Gate Cycle* is loaded with hypertextual and intertextual references to other popular fantasy media, such as Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, the *Dungeons & Dragons* tabletop roleplaying game, and the *Dragonlance* series, but for what purpose? Well, it serves as a cheeky genre commentary for the more seasoned fantasy readers, who carry their share of intertextual knowledge of the genre—and of Weis and Hickman's previous work. Of course, the novel series can still be read and understood without having read *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Dragonlance*, and without having played *Dungeons & Dragons*. It still asks a lot of the readers, as if the authors expect their target audience to be hardcore fantasy media fans. Furthermore, the intertextuality serves a narratological and thematic purpose, which the following chapter of analysis will elaborate upon in much more detail, as these fantasy references are linked to the dystopian nature of the series—which is further linked to possible worlds theory and the analysis of the epitext, but I'll get to that. Additionally, writing the series in the subgenre of a scholarly document enhances reader immersion and credibility, which aids the suggestion that this nonactual world pretends to be its own actual world, which I shall further discuss later.

Architextuality: Dystopia

The **Intertextual Analysis** continues here until I move into the **Possible Worlds Analysis**, and the dystopian genre commentary continues into that. We stay with the character of Zifnab a little while longer, as he weaves together both of these parts of the analysis rather well on his own in the narrative of *The Death Gate Cycle*. This is the chapter where I slowly move from a structural analysis of Zifnab's intertextual references and into an interpretation of the purpose as to why Zifnab makes these references in the first place. Once I get further into the possible worlds analysis, we will be leaving behind Zifnab.

The character of Zifnab, once again, comes into play here, as he makes not only intertextual references to other popular fantasy media, but to other pop-culture texts as well. First, he makes references to popular science fiction media such as *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*.

> "The vessel needs a new name! Something more appropriate to a starship. *Apollo? Gemini? Enterprise*. Already taken. *Millenium Falcon*. Trademarked. All rights reserved. No! Wait, I have it! *Dragon Star!* That's it! *Dragon Star!*" (Weis and Hickman *Elven Star* 286)

"Apollo" and "Gemini" are the names of real NASA spacecrafts (Loff "Apollo", "Gemini – Bridge to the Moon"), but the "Enterprise" and "Millenium Falcon" are the names of fictional spacefaring vessels from the aforementioned *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*. Zifnab later shows up to save the day on dragon back, pretending to be Luke Skywalker from *Star Wars*:

> "Red Leader to Red One!" the old man howled. (Weis and Hickman *The Seventh Gate* 287)
>
> "Go rescue the princess! My squadron'll take over!" (Weis and Hickman *The Seventh Gate* 287)
>
> "Good-bye, Zifnab," Alfred said quietly. […] he heard a faint cry.
>
> "The name's… Luke…" (Weis and Hickman *The Seventh Gate* 287)

These references are intertextual in the sense that they refer to a greater textuality found outside the world of books—though, of course, I could also find any number of novels and comic books that are based off of the originally small screen series *Star Trek* and originally big screen series *Star Wars*. The point is that this is still intertextual, but it

refers to the second genre that *The Death Gate Cycle* occupies, the science fiction and dystopian genre.

Furthermore, Zifnab often references James Bond, also known as double-o-seven (007), the fictional British Secret Service agent.

> "You!" He scowled.
> "Who?" The old man brightened.
> "Zifnab!" Xar spat the name.
> "Oh." The old man sagged despondently. "Not someone else? You weren't expecting someone else? A Mr. Bond, perhaps?" (Weis and Hickman *Into the Labyrinth* 229)

He alludes to James Bond again on pages 233, 275, 331, 332, and 397 of *Into the Labyrinth*. He also makes one final Bond reference in *The Seventh Gate*, while magically disguised as James Bond to hide his real identity (65). One of these James Bond references, specifically on page 275 of *Into the Labyrinth*, happens right after a big emotional moment, where he reveals his backstory and how he came to lose his sanity. This moment, where Zifnab's backstory is revealed, is dystopian.

Intertextuality Analysis Ends

Zifnab not only mentions fantasy media but science fiction media in general as well, such as *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*. He also mentions James Bond fairly often; one memorable instance actually being interwoven with one of his more plot-relevant and tragic moments, where Zifnab reveals his backstory to the reader—which I shall discuss very soon in the following. But once again, the authors are presupposing that the reader has the foreknowledge to understand these pop-culture references. The purpose of references like this is partly to signal to readers that there is something different about this fantasy novel series, but it takes a while for the series to truly reveal its dystopian nature. The reader may have thought Zifnab's references and jokes were not relevant to the story itself, that they were simply a humorous inclusion. But these references are *also* partly just made as an in-joke between the authors and reader. I wish to further elaborate upon the purpose and use of intertextual references in *The Death Gate Cycle* in the following chapter of analysis, the **Possible Worlds Analysis**. However, this is where the hypertextuality and intertextuality analysis ends, and the **Possible Worlds Analysis**

Begins—though we will be staying within the realm of the dystopian genre history and architextuality commentary. The beginning of the **Possible Worlds Analysis** shall elaborate on my interpretation of why these intertextual references matter so much to the narrative and themes of *The Death Gate Cycle*, not only on an architextual level but as an addition to the social commentary aspect of the series.

Possible Worlds Analysis Begins

The **Possible Worlds Analysis** is where the analysis truly delves into the *why* of all of the references that have been made by Zifnab so far, after which the analysis will move on from Zifnab and into some of the prominent social commentary of *The Death Gate Cycle*. A lot of the social commentary can also be tied to the dystopian narrative of the world of *The Death Gate Cycle*, hence why we are still continuing with the **Architextuality: Dystopia** chapter. After which we will focus more specifically on the social commentary of the *Kicksey-winsey*, *Racism*, and *Religion* in *The Death Gate Cycle*. Many ideologemes will here present themselves.

Zifnab uses references to other texts because his character remembers what the world looked like before it was destroyed and reshaped, in other words, before it was "Sundered." Excuse me for inserting such a lengthy quote in my close-reading analysis, but this whole scene is quintessential to Zifnab's narrative role in the story:

> "But when they came, I wasn't there. I couldn't leave the people. I hoped I might be able to save them. And so I was left behind. On Earth. I saw it. The end. The Sundering."
>
> The old man drew in a trembling breath. "There was nothing I could do. No help. Not for them. Not for any of them—the 'deplorable but unavoidable civilian casualties.' … 'It's a question of priorities,' Samah said. 'We can't save everyone. And those who survive will be better off.' "And so Samah left them to die. I saw… I saw…"
>
> A tremor shook the old man's thin body. Tears filled his eyes and a look of horror began to contort his face—a look so dreadful, so awful, that despite himself, Xar recoiled before it.

> The old man's thin lips parted as if he would scream, but no scream came out. The eyes grew wider and wider, reliving horrors only he could see, only he could remember.
>
> "The fires that devoured cities, plains, and forests. The rivers that ran blood-red. The oceans boiling, steam blotting out the sun. The charred bodies of the countless dead. The living running and running, with nowhere to run to."
>
> "Who are you?" Xar asked, awed. "*What* are you?"
>
> […]
>
> "Who are you?" Xar repeated.
>
> He looked into the old man's eyes… and then Xar saw the madness.
>
> It dropped like a final curtain, dousing the memories, putting out the fires, clouding over the red-hot skies, blotting out the horror.
>
> The madness. A gift? Or a punishment.
>
> "Who are you?" Xar demanded a third time.
>
> "My name?" The old man smiled vacantly, happily. "Bond. James Bond." (Weis and Hickman *Into the Labyrinth* 274-275)

This is partly the purpose of these references, to foreshadow that exact plot twist, which puts all the previous intertextual references and jokes made by Zifnab into a different light afterwards. His references have always occurred within the context of the story and were able to be heard by the characters, however, this moment solidifies the references as not just jokes meant for the reader but as a part of the worldbuilding. In conclusion, Zifnab's character makes pop culture references because he remembers the past, which is *our* actual present.

Then there are other jokes of his about our world, the actual world, which are difficult to place within the context of textuality: When Zifnab's dragon makes a joke about "all-you-can-eat-buffets" (Weis and Hickman *Elven Star* 114), or when Zifnab makes a joke like this:

> I'll take over. Highly competent. Frequent flyer. Over forty hours in the air. DC-three. First class, of course. I had a superb view of the control

> panel every time the stewardess opened the curtain. (Weis and Hickman *Elven Star* 242)

The question is if jokes like these are transtextual or not. An “all-you-can-eat-buffet” is a concept in the restaurant business from the actual world—this, I would argue, is not transtextual or intertextual, as it does not reference a textual work, such as a book. A DC-three is a plane, also from the actual world (Burke “How the DC-3 Revolutionized Air Travel”). So, these are not intertextual or in any way transtextual. These are references to the real world, or, in the world of *The Death Gate Cycle*, references to concepts, phenomena, events, and objects from the pre-dystopian past. So, through the character of Zifnab, who makes both intertextual references and references to events and concepts from the actual world, transtextuality and possible worlds theory works in tandem in *The Death Gate Cycle* in order to, in dystopian fashion, comment on the present day, which, in the world of this story, is the past.

Zifnab says other things about our world, but not all of them are intertextual or refer to the greater textuality—some of these jokes are more dystopian and “historical,” in the sense that our present is the past of this nonactual world. Sure, some of his references could arguably be seen as intertextual, such as the aforementioned mention of the Apollo and Gemini space programs. These *could* be seen as a reference to a greater textuality of the history of NASA spacefaring, on which much material has been written; It is a sort of nonfictional intertextuality. He also makes references to breathing exercises (Weis and Hickman *Elven Star* 240), he mentions nuclear reactors (ibid. 322), bread boxes (Weis and Hickman *Hand of Chaos* 52), Texas (ibid.), Berlin 1948 (ibid.), cigarettes (ibid.), and the American television show *Jeopardy* (ibid. 230). Once again, how many of these are intertextual and how many of them cross over into simply social references? All of the examples mentioned here are not so much intertextual references and allusions; They are mentions of events, places, inventions, and cultural phenomena from the actual world. This is where we really move on from textuality into social commentary, that is, the possible worlds analysis. Allow me to move away from Zifnab for now.

For example, the division of the races in *The Death Gate Cycle*, which is divided between “Mensch” and non-Mensch races, of which, the non-Mensch races see

themselves as superior. This mimics racial discourse from the actual world. I thought it was a subtle nod to Nazi Germany, considering how non-Mensch races, the Sartans and the Patryns, consider themselves above the Mensch races, who they view as lesser races in need of their guidance and protection or, in extreme cases, in need of their authoritarian leadership. According to Friedrich Nietzche, the "Übermensch" is the goal of humanity itself (Nietzche "Zarathustras fortale"), a term appropriated by Hitler and the Nazis to describe their idea of the "superior race" (Hendricks "How the Nazis Hijacked Nietzche, and How It Can Happen to Anybody", Prideaux "Far right, misogynist, humourless? Why Nietzsche is misunderstood"). According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, a "mensch" in the English and American English language is "a good person, especially someone who does something kind or helpful" ("Mensch"), which is just as likely to have been the inspiration for why Weis and Hickman chose this word to refer to the human, elf, and dwarf races as the "mensch" races. According to the same dictionary, the origin of the word "mensch" is taken from the Yiddish word, "mensh," and the German word "mensch," both literally meaning "person." (ibid.) In *The Joys of Yiddish*, a lexicon of common words and phrases from words originating in the Yiddish language that have become known to speakers of American English, author Leo Rosten explains that a "mensch" is a term used as high praise: "someone to admire and emulate, someone of noble character. The key to being 'a real mensch' is nothing less than character, rectitude, dignity, a sense of what is right, responsible, decorous." (Rosten 240) This is another one of those instances where the transtextuality gets muddled, and there are no other clues as to what Weis and Hickman truly meant when they chose to use this word in their story. What remains is that in this world of theoretical fiction, in this possible future, the issue of superior versus inferior races still reigns, even alluding to only a slightly different version of the language that was used in the past from the actual world. It takes readers outside the text to the ideological representations of racially charged supremacist discourse.

The effect of said narrative concerning the discourse between the superior fantasy races versus the inferior fantasy races is that of a simple allegory that is easily applied to many discourses of class, race, ethnicity, and nationality. This makes it difficult to pinpoint one particular racial or ethnic discourse and declare: "This is exactly what this

narrative is a social commentary upon!" Because there are many real-world instances of one group of people who believe themselves to be above or superior to another group of people. The power imbalance between the non-Mensch and the Mensch does not even narrow down the list of potential historical events and discourses that this narrative could apply to. This narrative could apply to white supremacist discourse, Nazi-Germany discourse, Rwandan Civil War Hutu-Tutsi discourse, immigration discourse, and so on. That makes this narrative a lot more symbolic than realistic social commentary, and it becomes an allegory that is applicable to a wide variety of situations concerning supremacist group ideologies. Though, personally, *I* believe it to be allegorical of Nazi supremacist discourse, since the term "Mensch" is so reminiscent of the word "Übermensch." But the point is that the word "Mensch" seems to present somewhat of an ideologeme, that is, a word which we are still to this day conflicted about the meaning of.

Another mix of dystopian genre commentary and social commentary comes from the world of *The Death Gate Cycle* having been destroyed and changed by a nuclear holocaust. The nuclear holocaust is a different event from the Sundering, the event which Zifnab recounts in the earlier example. The Sundering split up the Earth into a number of new worlds, including the worlds of fire, water, air, stone, and so on. The nuclear holocaust happened *before* then. In the world of *The Death Gate Cycle*, the nuclear holocaust was the catalyst to a number of changes that make this world different from that of the world we live in.

> But as time passed, a new religion swept the land. It was known as "science." […] At the end of the twentieth century, the humans unleashed a terrible war upon themselves. Their weapons were marvels of scientific design and technology and brought death and destruction to untold millions. In that day, science destroyed itself. […] The survivors were plunged into what was known as the Age of Dust, during which they were forced to struggle to simply remain alive. (Weis and Hickman *Fire Sea* 230-231)

> "Let me describe our world to you, Brother," said the Councillor, leaning forward, fingertips together on the top of the table. "Earth, it was called. Once, many thousands of years ago, it was ruled exclusively by humans.

> Consistent with their warring, destructive nature, they unleashed a dreadful war upon themselves. The war did not destroy the world, as so many had feared and predicted. But it changed the world irretrievably. New races, they say, were born out of the cataclysmic smoke and flame. (Weis and Hickman *Serpent Mage* 296)

I believe these weapons of science and of mass destruction to be nuclear weapons, or something akin, as it only took one day to plunge the world into an "Age of Dust." (Weis and Hickman *Fire Sea* 230-231) I also believe the character speaking here, Samah (called "the Councillor"), is referring to the threat of nuclear holocaust when he says: "The war did not destroy the world, as so many had feared and predicted." (Weis and Hickman *Serpent Mage* 296) Other than being a dystopian genre commentary, it is also connected to the theoretical fiction aspect of *The Death Gate Cycle*, in that the nuclear holocaust is a recent anxiety in the history of humankind, following the invention of the atom bomb in 1945 (Alt Om Historie 4).

Again, the dystopian genre commentary rears its head right at the epilogue of the seven-novel series, when the character Limbeck discovers something which he names "Kicksey-warming." I will explain the meaning of "Kicksey" in a later subchapter, but for now, know that there is a huge machine on the world of air known as the Kicksey-winsey.

> "An environmental flux, no doubt caused by the increased activity of the Kicksey-winsey, which has created a heating up of the atmosphere. I will call it Kicksey-warming."
>
> Which he did, and made a speech about it that very night, to which no one listened, due to the fact that they were mopping up the water. (Weis and Hickman *The Seventh Gate* 313)

This happens in the epilogue, immediately after the world has been saved from certain destruction—indicating that this is the next big challenge the characters must face post-narrative and post-series. "Kicksey-warming" is an allusion to global warming. Global warming, once again, is a relatively new issue in human history, on which much science fiction has recently been written, even birthing a new subgenre known as "cli-fi" (Leikam and Leyda 110). Global warming is the sudden increase of the temperature in the general

atmosphere caused by CO_2 pollution which is melting the polar ice caps and causing ocean levels to rise, thereby fundamentally changing the Earth's climate, and causing other kinds of natural disasters (Jørgensen 26). Just the single word "Kicksey-warming" (Weis and Hickman *The Seventh Gate* 313) takes the reader outside the text: It makes it impossible for the reader to remain inside the novel, due to the presence of global warming discourse being alluded to. Once more, a double entendre of dystopian genre commentary and theoretical fiction confronting modern anxieties from our world, the actual world.

In summary: The world of *The Death Gate Cycle* has been destroyed many times over, resulting in dystopia after dystopia until the point in time where the story of the novel series begins. First, the Earth was ravaged by nuclear war, which plunged humanity into an Age of Dust, after which new races, such as dwarves and elves, resurfaced. Science was lost and magic returned. Then, following the birth of two other new magically powerful races, the Sartan and the Patryn races, the world was sundered in the event dubbed the Sundering. This is the event which Zifnab watched happen before his very eyes, unable to stop it and growing slowly mad in these new worlds that were created from the old one. Zifnab retains memories of life and pop-culture from the Earth as we, the reader, know it. His references foreshadowed his tragic backstory. The story mimics our world in other ways, such as the supremacist discourse between the races, the modern anxieties of a nuclear holocaust, and the burgeoning anxieties of global warming. Here we have a work of theoretical fiction that takes advantage of its dystopian connections to the Earth as we know it from the time of the series' publication.

Kicksey-winsey. I have briefly brought up the concept of the "Kicksey-winsey", which I am now going to analyze in more detail, as it is the device that weaves together a lot of the series' theoretical fiction and social commentary that has to do with concepts like slavery, religion, and industry. The "Kicksey-winsey" is introduced in the first book in the series as the big machine that the dwarves on the world of air are slaves to. They work on it, live in it, and worship it. Allow me to elaborate further.

In order to signal to readers early on that this is a future dystopian world, the text alludes to the actual world by having objects from our world described as they would be in the world of *The Death Gate Cycle*. A lamp is described as "a long stick from which

dangled a long, pronged tail"—on which, "A bulbous ball affixed on top of the stick hissed and sputtered alarmingly for an instant, then sullenly began to flow with a bluish-white light." (Weis and Hickman *Dragon Wing* 71-72) As mentioned, this is a description of a lamp that details all the properties of a lamp from the actual world without actually calling it by its name—were it intertextual, it *would* be an allusion. It is a part of the possible world proposal; In the world of the story, this lamp is used in a religious ritual, but it also serves the purpose of subtly alerting readers to the theoretical fiction and possible world aspect of *The Death Gate Cycle*. Readers will ask themselves what relationship this world has with the actual world, and they will soon find that it has *many* relationships with it, both narratively and theoretically.

As mentioned, the dwarves, sometimes known as "Geg" or "Gegs", are ignorant slaves to a machine known as the "Kicksey-winsey":

> The Gegs did their work well. They were competent, skilled, and dexterous, but unimaginative. Each Geg knew how to serve his or her particular part of the Kicksey-winsey and had no interest in any other part. Further, he never questioned the reasons for doing what he did. Why the whirly-wheel had to be turned, why the black arrow of the whistle toot should never be allowed to point to red, why the pull-arm needed to be pulled, the push-arm pushed, or the cranky-clank cranked were questions that did not occur to the average Geg. (Weis and Hickman *Dragon Wing* 63)

Once again, the writers chose not to use familiar words from the actual world to describe the same things in this story's world: "whirly-wheel" to describe hand wheels and valves, black arrows pointing to red to describe pressure scales, "whistle toot" to describe factory whistles, pull- and push-arms instead of levers, and so on. (ibid.) The allusions to real-world technological industrial objects in a fantasy setting that also contains dragons and magic suggests to the readers that this part in particular is going be to be pretty on-the-nose for actual world parallels. And this is a theoretical fiction that looks at some sort of industrial indoctrination which effectively makes the dwarves of this world into willing ignorant slaves.

The narrative of the Gegs (dwarves) who work on the Kicksey-winsey machine is a slavery narrative. The dwarf character Limbeck, one of the series' protagonists, is attempting to liberate them all from their indoctrinated servitude to the machine.

> "For centuries we have been told by our leaders that we were placed in this realm of Storm and Chaos because we were not deemed worthy to take our place with the Welves above. We who are flesh and blood and bone could not hope to live in the land of the immortals. When we are worthy, our leaders tell us, then the Welves will come from Above and pass judgment on us and we shall rise up into the heavens. In the meantime, it is our duty to serve the Kicksey-winsey and wait for that great day. I say"—here Limbeck raised a clenched and inky fist above his head—"I say that day will never come!" (Weis and Hickman *Dragon Wing* 56)

This is all reminiscent of the history of African American slaves who made many unsuccessful attempts to free themselves before slavery was abolished (Vendelbo 20). The language Limbeck uses here is also reminiscent of the racist rhetoric that has been used against real life slaves in the history of the actual world, that is, the rhetoric that black people are hierarchically "lesser" than white people. This is further illustrated in how the elves view the Gegs, the dwarves who they have tricked and indoctrinated into serving the Kicksey-winsey: "The elves cared nothing about the Gegs. Humans were beasts. The Gegs were insects." (Weis and Hickman *Dragon Wing* 288) Again, racist rhetoric based on a constructed hierarchy that places the elves on top in order to justify the enslavement of humans and Gegs (dwarves). The fantastical racism is reminiscent of parallels to the actual world, mostly the American and Western world.

Building further upon this narrative of industrial indoctrination, and into the realm of religious indoctrination, the dwarves use factories as religious temples of worship. "The Factree was a sacred and holy place to the Gegs. Not only was it the Kicksey-winsey's birthplace, but it was in the Factree that the Gegs' most hallowed icon was located" (Weis and Hickman *Dragon Wing* 70). The word for this "holy place" is the word "factory," only written more phonetically as "Factree." There is a narrative amalgamation of industry and religion here, one that criticizes both of those individually

and mutually: It is a criticism of industrial indoctrination which turns workers into slaves and a criticism of religious indoctrination which profits off of justifying said slavery. It is a dystopian social commentary that takes the idea of industrial indoctrination and takes it to its utmost extreme, which is a form of religious indoctrination. The narrative here is clearly against religion and industry taken to such an extreme, perhaps due to working class anxieties in our actual world post-industrialization society. Especially in America, where unionizing is, to this day, heavily and illegally discouraged by major corporations:

> Most American workers want a union in their workplace but very few have it, because the right to organize—supposedly guaranteed by federal law—has been effectively cancelled out by a combination of legal and illegal employer intimidation tactics. (Lafer and Loustanau "Fear at work: An inside account of how employers threaten, intimidate, and harass workers to stop them from exercising their right to collective bargaining")
> The data show that U.S. employers are willing to use a wide range of legal and illegal tactics to frustrate the rights of workers to form unions and collectively bargain. (McNicholas et al. "Unlawful: U.S. employers are charged with violating federal law in 41.5% of all union election campaigns")

Thus, the narrative ideologeme of Limbeck forming his own union and fighting for truth and equality for all.

Inside this factory, or "Factree", they worship a statue of their gods, who are called "Mangers": "it was in the Factree that the Gegs' most hallowed icon was located—the brass statue of a Manger." (Weis and Hickman *Dragon Wing* 70) This is another play on words, this time a play on the word "manager," only it is missing a letter. So, factories in this dwarven world are religious temples, and their gods are managers. This is simply more evidence for the combined narrative criticism of religious and industrial indoctrination. A warning, perhaps, not to worship false gods, and a joke for the readers who know exactly what this social commentary and dystopian narrative is trying to tell them by mocking industrial power structures like this.

Furthermore, building onto this religious aspect of slavery and industrial indoctrination, only religious leaders can and are allowed to read the religious texts, and

building further upon the capitalist aspect of this religious slavery indoctrination scheme, the religious text is called the “Struction Manal” (Weis and Hickman *Dragon Wing* 74). Many religions are based on religious texts; *The Bible*, for example, used to be written exclusively in Latin, a dead language which also used to be exclusively taught to priests only, because the Catholic Church forbade the populace from reading *The Bible* by themselves. This was before it was translated into other languages for wider accessibility. (Starr “Why Christians Were Denied Access To Their Bible For 1,000 Years”) In **Epitext**, I will further explore Weis and Hickman’s relationship with biblical references and Christianity. This narrative in *The Death Gate Cycle* is literally taking religious and industrial indoctrination to their extremes by mixing the narrative of withholding education and language from a group of people in order to indoctrinate them more easily with the idea of an instruction manual.

Electricity and light are also seen as divine in this dwarven society, and they pray to their gods, the “Mangers,” before they insert plugs into outlets. (Weis and Hickman *Dragon* Wing 70-72) Weis and Hickman decided to do this with something that we, as readers from the actual world, would know as a phenomenon that can be explained by science. This is narratively used as an example of something the enslaved and unwillingly ignorant dwarves see as a divine thing. Of course, *we* know the lights in the “Factree” would still work even if the dwarves did not pray to the gods before they plugged it in. The dwarves do not.

And, finally, to top off this combination of slavery, industry, and religion, the leader of the dwarves is a foreman and the spiritual leader is a clerk. That is, the leader of their people is called a “froman”, (Weis and Hickman *Dragon Wing*) which, following the theme of taking words from the actual world and changing them slightly in their phrasing and usage in this possible world of theoretical fiction, is the word “foreman” but spelled differently. The religious leader is called a “head clark,” (ibid.) which follows the same theme of changing the name of an industrial work position like “clerk,” perhaps also a word that is reminiscent of the word for “clergy,” and inserting it into this social commentary narrative of slavery, industry, and religion.

On the topic of the “froman” and the “head clark,” these two characters actually have a very telling conversation which I believe is an excellent example of what Weis

and Hickman believe to be the core issue in industrial and religious indoctrination and slavery overall. It is a private conversation between these two leaders who are discussing the validity of Limbeck's claims that the dwarves are being lied to by their slavers, the elves who pretend to be gods in order to use the dwarves:

> "Besides," said Darral, his heavy brows creased in a scowl, "if these gods aren't gods, like Limbeck said they weren't, how can we punish him for being right?"
>
> Unaccustomed to wading in such deep philosophical waters, the head clark ignored the question and struck out for high ground.
>
> "We wouldn't be punishing him for being right, we'd be punishing him for spreading it around."
>
> There was certainly some logic to that, Darral had to admit. He wondered sourly how his brother-in-law had come up with such a good idea and concluded it must have been the bump on the head. (Weis and Hickman *Dragon Wing* 262)

I truly believe the statement, "We wouldn't be punishing him for being right, we'd be punishing him for spreading it around" (ibid.), is the most succinct quote to illustrate the main ideology of Weis and Hickman's social commentary on American industrial and religious indoctrination. And, clearly, Weis and Hickman are right to fear that, in a dystopian world, should these be taken to their extremes, the result will be another form of slavery. American employers sabotaging workers' attempts at unionizing is, in this narrative, taken to its extreme. It is highly dystopian.

To sum up: The narrative of the lives of the dwarves who are subservient to the "Kicksey-winsey" is one big social commentary on industrialism, religion, and slavery. The parallels to the actual world are further highlighted by the descriptions of items from our world that in this world are seen as divine. The reader is given this interesting narrative mishmash of enslaved dwarves working on a machine due to religious indoctrination for the benefit of dwarves higher on the social ladder, such as leaders and religious leaders, and for the benefit of the elves, who take advantage of the water supply that is produced by the machine and the labors of the dwarves. The narrative of Limbeck forming his own union in order to combat the indoctrination of the enslaved dwarves and

fight for truth and freedom is very reminiscent of the issues that American workers face by trying to organize and unionize. American employers today sadly still use intimidation tactics to discourage American workers from unionizing (Lafer and Loustanau "Fear at work: An inside account of how employers threaten, intimidate, and harass workers to stop them from exercising their right to collective bargaining", McNicholas et al. "Unlawful: U.S. employers are charged with violating federal law in 41.5% of all union election campaigns"), and it is that kind of employer intimidation which *The Death Gate Cycle* takes issue with. Fantastical racism and slavery are still very malleable in terms of real-world comparisons—are the dwarves a social commentary on the American Civil Rights Movement or on contemporary industrialism, capitalism, and class struggles? Perhaps it is a mix of all of the above. But I believe that Weis and Hickman, no matter what topics they tackle in *The Death Gate Cycle*, always retain a distinctively American viewpoint. More on that in the following.

Racism. Fantasy racism is further used in *The Death Gate Cycle* to create a theoretical fiction version of racism that highlights discussions of race from our world. By which I mean, there are other examples outside the one I just mentioned in the subchapter on the Kicksey-winsey. Allow me to elaborate.

First, there are a few instances where the fantasy racism in *The Death Gate Cycle* mirrors the discourse of the Civil Rights Movement of America. The most glaring example is when the dwarf Limbeck, leader of the rebel group that fights against the aforementioned slavery, who forbids the use of the word "Geg" to describe dwarves. The best example is when he has a big fight with his dwarven wife, Jarre, in *The Hand of Chaos*:

> "We used to be peace-loving. Never in the history of the Gegs did we ever kill anyone—"
>
> "Not 'Gegs'!" said Limbeck sternly.
>
> Jarre ignored him. "Now we *live* for killing! Some of the young people, that's all they think about now. Killing Welves—"
>
> "Elves, my dear," Limbeck corrected her. "I've told you. The term 'welves' is a slave word, taught to us by our 'masters.' And we're not

> Gegs, we're dwarves. The word 'Geg' is derogatory, used to keep us in our place." (Weis and Hickman 84)

This, as I said, is reminiscent of the way the American Civil Rights Movement shifted from using the word "negroes" to the word "black" to the phrase "African American" to refer to themselves. It signaled a new form of racial awareness that has since stayed in use (Ringgaard "Hvorfor må man ikke sige neger?", Martin "From Negro to Black to African American: The Power of Names and Naming"). The narrative of an oppressed, previously enslaved group of people engaging in discourse about what to name themselves in *The Death Gate Cycle* clearly mirrors this actual world movement's real changes. It creates a possible world narrative of theoretical fiction that tackles discourses like these from the actual world.

For the record, Weis and Hickman are both white, so that is likely affecting their perspective on how to write a narrative like this; Their stance is that the dwarves are right to seek mutual respect and liberation, but not through violence (see the above quote). This stance is reminiscent of some people's more moderate opinions on movements like the Black Panther Party. "Like Malcolm X, the Black Panthers believed that nonviolent protests could not truly liberate black Americans or give them power over their own lives." (Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture "The Black Panther Party: Challenging Police and Promoting Social Change") The Black Panther Party has protested against police brutality since its founding in 1966. Evidently, Weis and Hickman are opposed to this style of protest, much like other white Americans were at the time of the Black Panther Party's heyday: ""The media, like most of white America, was deeply frightened by their aggressive and assertive style of protest," Professor Rhodes said." (Russonello "Fascination and Fear: Covering the Black Panthers") The meaning of the "Geg" versus "dwarf" discourse in this narrative is both inside and outside the text, making it yet another ideologeme.

Second, there is a narrative of slavery as seen from the perspective of the elves on the second world, the world of fire—a *different* world from this multiple world narrative, in *Elven Star*.

> Paithan had tried to point out to his sister that she wasn't being rational—she gave the humans credit for a phenomenal and cunning intellect on one

> hand, while maintaining that they were little better than animals on the other.
>
> "Humans really aren't too different from us, Cal," Paithan had said on one memorable occasion.
>
> He had never tried that logic again. (Weis and Hickman *Elven Star* 94)
>
> "You humans were born to be slaves! You know nothing else!" (Weis and Hickman *Elven Star* 294)

This, of course, shifts the narrative of slavery from its usual perspective in the actual world and into a new theoretical possible world version of itself, with elves and humans and dwarves as the objects of discourse instead of the typical human ethnicities we are familiar with in our world. Slavery, of course, looks different to different parts of the world, and this fantasy version of it is likely more specifically influenced by American and Western histories of slavery. I say this because no matter if it is the dwarves who are enslaved or if it the humans who are enslaved, it is always the type of slavery that is based on race, not the type of slavery where a people of the same race or ethnicity enslave each other. This American Westernized view of racism centers on the issue of slavery rather than other sources of racism, such as immigration.

The fantasy racism in *The Death Gate Cycle* definitely mirrors the discourse surrounding the American Civil Rights Movement and the Black Panther movement. Weis and Hickman's ideology on said discourses are very evident in the writing of the narrative in *The Death Gate Cycle*: They believe in freedom and equality and that it should be fought for, though preferably not by violent means. The narrative further utilizes the fantasy races of humans, elves, and dwarves to speak more generally on the discourse of racism, rather than indicating troubles between ethnicities or nationalities of people from our world, the actual world.

Religion. The religious commentary of *The Death Gate Cycle*, as well, does not end with the narrative of the Kicksey-winsey on the world of air but is explored in many ways and forms on many of the possible worlds in the series. It is intimately tied to Weis and Hickman's own religious beliefs.

The villains—that is, the main villains, of the Sartan and Patryn races—of the overarching story of *The Death Gate Cycle* do not believe in God and, in fact, believe themselves to be gods, which the narrative admonishes them for.

> "I do not fault those who fell victim to this subterfuge, Brother. All of us, at one time or another, long to rest our head upon the breast of One stronger, wiser than ourselves; to surrender all responsibility to an All-Knowing, All-Powerful Being. Such dreams are pleasant, but then we must wake to reality." (Weis and Hickman *Serpent Mage* 289)

Alfred, on the contrary, one of the main protagonists and heroes of the overarching story, believes that his race, the Sartan, made a mistake when they took upon the role of gods to destroy and remake the Earth.

> He made a weak gesture toward the row of coffins. "Nobody here can harm you. Not anymore. Not that they would have anyway—at least, not intentionally." He sighed and, turning in his place, looked long around the room. "But how much harm have we done unintentionally, meaning the best? Not gods, but with the power of gods. And yet lacking the wisdom." (Weis and Hickman *Dragon Wing* 271)

Alfred also begins to believe in a God, and in the ending of the final book of the series, *The Seventh Gate*, his and Zifnab's thoughts on God mirrors Tracy Hickman's own beliefs on the matter—which I will elaborate on further in the analysis chapter **Epitext**.

> "But," Alferd argued, "then where is the higher power? I know there is one. Samah encountered it. The Abarrach Sartan who entered the Chamber ages ago discovered it."
>
> "The Sartan on Chelestra did the same," Haplo added.
>
> "So they did," said Zifnab. "So have you."
>
> "Oh!" Alfred's face was alight, aglow. Then, slowly, his glow faded. "But I didn't *see* anything."
>
> "Of course not," said Zifnab. "You looked in the wrong place. You've always looked in the wrong place."
>
> "In a mirror," Haplo murmured, remembering his lord's last words.

> "Ah, ha!" Zifnab shouted. "That's the ticket!" The old man reached out a skinny hand, jabbed Alfred on the breast. "Look in a mirror."
>
> "D-dear me, no!" Alfred blushed, stammered. "I don't! I can't! *I'm* not the higher power!"
>
> "But you are." Zifnab smiled, waved his arms. "And so is Haplo. And so am I. So is—let's see, on Arianus, we have four thousand six hundred and thirty-seven inhabitants of the Mid Realms alone. Their names, in alphabetical order, are Aaltje, Aaltruide, Aaron…"
>
> "We get your point, sir," said the dragon sternly.
>
> The old man was ticking them off on his fingers. "Aastami, Abbie…"
>
> "But we can't *all* be gods," Alfred protested, confused. (Weis and Hickman *The Seventh Gate* 308-309)

All the other characters mentioned in this scene are also on the heroes' side, Haplo being another of the main protagonists of the series. The core belief here is that God, with a capital G, is inside all of us, according to *The Death Gate Cycle*.

Weis and Hickman especially wish to make a statement on the idea of life and death. For example, with the character of Hugh, who is indoctrinated into a death cult known as the Kir monks in *The Death Gate Cycle*.

> "Hugh! What are you doing?" The voice was shill and dank and dark as the room.
>
> "I—I was helping Rolf, Brother. He has the fever and Gran Maude said that if it didn't break he'd die—"
>
> "Die?" The voice shook the stone chamber. "Of course he will die! It is his privilege to die an innocent child and escape the evil to which mankind is heir. That evil which daily must be scourged from our weak shells." The hand forced Hugh to his knees. "Pray, Hugh. Pray that your sin in attempting to thwart the ancestor's will by performing the unnatural act of healing be forgiven you. Pray for death—" (Weis and Hickman *Dragon Wing* 38)
>
> Kir monks do not laugh. They see nothing funny in life (ibid. 185).

This cult does not believe in saving those who can be saved, and that death is the ultimate goal of life, which is described as a very bleak and abusive outlook on existence. Evidently, the Kir monks are the personification of a view of death that Weis and Hickman find to be worshipping death so much that it is an insult to life.

However, later, after Hugh dies in *Dragon Wing*, Hugh is brought *back* to life by use of the forbidden magic of necromancy, and this is also seen as a bad thing by the general narrative. Hugh found peace when he died, but having been brought back by necromancy, lives on longing for death while unable to die or kill himself (Weis and Hickman *The Hand of Chaos* 240). Only when he finally dies once more does he find peace again (Weis and Hickman *The Seventh Gate* 306). It seems to suggest that while preventable deaths should be prevented, that when the inevitable finally happens, the dead should be allowed to rest. This idea is explored extensively in *Fire Sea*, where the art of necromancy is first introduced: “The balance must be maintained. For every person brought back untimely to this life, another person—somewhere—untimely dies.” (Weis and Hickman *Fire Sea* 129) This idea is further echoed by the narrative of the elves in the world of air, who keep souls trapped in the living world so as to use them in magic rituals. These souls also long to be freed so they may move on into the afterlife. (Weis and Hickman *The Hand of Chaos* 446) Once more, in the narrative, religious ignorance causes suffering and despair, but there is still one “correct” set of religious beliefs to be had: The beliefs of Weis and Hickman.

Once I get into author comments and interviews in the **Epitext** chapter of analysis, I shall be able to connect these religious ideologies presented in *The Death Gate Cycle* with the beliefs and opinions of Weis and Hickman. For now, the religious ideology of *The Death Gate Cycle*, based on my interpretation of the narrative alone, is this: There is a God, an invisible God, that is inside all of us. We, ourselves, are not gods, and should not act with the power of gods, for we do not possess the wisdom to wield that kind of power. Death is a fact of life, and we should not fear it, for it will bring us peace, but we should also not worship it, for in the worship of death, we cannot properly appreciate life. Religious ignorance and religious indoctrination can cause suffering and despair but believing in a higher power can also be a relief and a support to us. Those are

the religious ideologies of Weis and Hickman, according to the narrative and themes of *The Death Gate Cycle*.

As far as dystopian genre commentary goes, clearly Weis and Hickman have touched upon some of the more modern anxieties of American culture and society in *The Death Gate Cycle* by utilizing its dystopian setting. Zifnab's character makes pop culture references because he remembers the past, which is the present of the actual world. The references partly foreshadow this plot twist and partly amuse the readers who may have read Weis and Hickman's previous work as well as popular fantasy and science fiction media in general. Transtextuality and possible worlds theory work together in *The Death Gate Cycle* in order to, in dystopian fashion, comment on the present day, which, in the world of this story, is the past. That is where the narrative moves on from textuality into social commentary, that is, the **Possible Worlds Analysis**.

Possible Worlds Analysis Ends

The Death Gate Cycle tackles many modern anxieties in its writing, which is not all that surprising considering it was published in America around the 1990s, although the 90s are now 20 years behind us. The series tackles the issue of superior versus inferior races, which is reminiscent of Nazism and other such racial supremacy discourses; the threat of a nuclear holocaust—a common anxiety found in dystopian fiction; and global warming, a relatively new anxiety of modern life. Furthermore, the Kicksey-winsey is a social commentary mixture that deals with slavery, religious indoctrination, and industrialism all at the same time. The slavery aspect is further explored in the fantasy racism aspect of *The Death Gate Cycle*. And from a very American point of view if I may add. The narrative of the dwarves on the world of air especially draws quite a few parallels to the history of the Civil Rights Movement in America, then to the Black Panther Party. But the core ideology clearly is: Racism is bad and so are racial supremacist beliefs. The religion aspect is also further explored through fantasy religions that narratively showcases certain religious ideologies as less ideal and very harmful while showcasing one single religious ideology as more ideal and less harmful. In Limbeck's story of freeing himself and his fellow dwarves from religious indoctrination, the social commentary and biting remarks are on full display, and using religion to subjugate one race by another is clearly admonished by the narrative. Finally, on the topic of industrial

social commentary, Weis and Hickman still retain a very American point of view in their narrative. Unionizing is a right that all should have, but employers, both in the narrative of *The Death Gate Cycle* and in the actual world of America today, are threatening, intimidating, harassing, and generally frustrating workers to stop them from unionizing. This is what is meant when dystopian theorists and academics say dystopian writers do not predict the future, they comment on the present. Employers cancelling out their employees' right to organize via intimidation tactics is a trend that Weis and Hickman must have—subconsciously even—picked up on and decided to write into their story in its most extreme form. Same with all of the aforementioned social commentaries and discourses that the narrative in *The Death Gate Cycle* presents.

Epitext

Here, I move on to an examination of the authors' intentions and thoughts behind the writing I have so far closely read and analyzed. It is imperative to remember many of the points I have so far mentioned. Most of the content of this chapter of analysis will focus on the epitext surrounding *The Death Gate Cycle*, that is, author interviews and the like.

First of all, just to lay the groundwork for this new historicist-inspired examination of the epitext, is the fact that, according to Maragret Weis, it is her who does the writing and Tracy Hickman who does the background work for their projects:

> We work out the scenes and some of the characters. Then I do the writing. It's important for us, at least, to have one voice. I do the writing, and Tracy goes back to Utah and does all the background work. (Ward "Margaret Weis: Dragon Team Player")

So, that is the general setup they seem to work with. I do not have any interpretations to make based on this just yet, but it gives a basic understanding of their working relationship.

Tracy Hickman is Mormon, which he admits is an influence on his fantasy writing:

> Fantasy is about ethical and moral choices—the questions of good and evil—and its structure is classic. Fantasy most closely follows the monomythic structure as defined by Joseph Campbell. I believe that this mythic structure goes right to the heart of the human experience and the

> very processes by which we think and perceive the world and universe around us. Joseph Campbell looks at the mythic cycle and sees Jungian psychology; I look at the mythic cycle and see the Alpha Story—the story of us all on our journey through mortality and our seeking to return home to Christ. (Young "Tracy Hickman")
>
> I once said at a BYU conference that the gospel seems to have some pretty fantastical elements! The plan of salvation—where we leave our heavenly home, pass the "portals of power" into mortality, journey through this mortal existence with trials and helpers as we try to obtain the prize of exaltation, must then endure to the end, pass back through the "portals of power" into immortality, and return again changed before our Father in Heaven—all of these elements are part of the basic Campbellian monomyth and every fantasy and classical story ever written. Fantasy, in this light and when properly executed, is a type and a shadow of the great story of us all, of our quest to return to our God as more perfect beings. The gospel is my life; I write my life; ergo, my writing is a reflection of my faith. (ibid.)

The quote almost explains itself. It *certainly* explains the biblical references made in *The Death Gate Cycle*, such as the ones made by Zifnab, who references The Book of Exodus, Nebuchadnezzar, and the fall of man (Weis and Hickman *Elven Star* 261, ibid. 263, Weis and Hickman *Into the Labyrinth* 30).

The previous quote by Hickman also would explain the series' previously mentioned fixation on the concept of God and life and death, especially the series' philosophy that life and death are an imitation of the hero's journey, or the monomyth. The monomythic structure that Hickman mentions is also more colloquially known as the hero's journey: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man." (Campbell 23) Hickman extends the idea of this monomyth to real life, as he believes it mirrors humanity's birth, life, and return to God. He and Weis also extends it to their writing in *The Death Gate Cycle*, such as in the character arc of

Hugh—whose arc of life and death I mentioned in the section *Religion* under the chapter **Possible Worlds Analysis Begins**.

In relation to the aforementioned *Dungeons & Dragons* intertextual references, both Weis and Hickman have also done official writing work for *Dungeons & Dragons*—the *Dragonlance* novels themselves are a novel series that are "coordinated with a trilogy of AD&D®modules." (Varney 120) "AD&D" here means "Advanced Dungeons & Dragons," an older edition of the roleplaying game that published in 1977-1979 (Goodreads "Advanced Dungeons & Dragons 1st Edition Series"). This bit of epitext further proves that the intertextual references to said tabletop roleplaying game franchise is an intentional nod to the authors' previous work.

As mentioned, the character of Zifnab is similar to the character Fizban from the authors' *Dragonlance* novels and again is similar to the character known as Zanfib from their later *Starshield* novels. The fact that their names are anagrams of each other has not been lost on readers of Weis and Hickman's works. According to Hickman:

> Fizban is a crazed wizard owned by TSR under copyright, while Zifnab is a completely different crazed wizard owned my Margaret and I. Incidentally, neither Fizban nor Zifnab have any relationship whatsoever to Zanfib—a crazed wizard from our Starshield series. I hope I have cleared this up once and for all. (Weis and Hickman *The Annotated Chronicles* 318)

More simply put, this character is a type of character that Weis and Hickman always try to include in their books, "regardless of how his name is spelled" as Hickman puts it. (The Gate Will Open "Author Quotes")

It is also a matter of legality. In addition, though this is some years after *The Death Gate Cycle* was published, Weis and Hickman have very recently sued TSR, in October 2020, and reached an undisclosed agreement in January 2021. (Hall "Dragonlance authors sue Dungeons & Dragons publisher Wizards of The Coast", "Dragonlance authors drop $10M lawsuit against Wizards of the Coast") They were working on more books in the Dragonlance series under contract, but TSR opted out of it, thus "Hickman and Weis claim, years of hard work — including story concepts and outlines previously approved — are now locked away from public view." (Polygon

"Dragonlance authors sue Dungeons & Dragons publisher Wizards of The Coast") As mentioned, the lawsuit was dropped, and all involved parties have refused to comment. "How exactly the disagreement has been resolved is unknown." (Polygon "Dragonlance authors drop $10M lawsuit against Wizards of the Coast") Clearly, publishing novels that are set in a universe which is officially owned by a corporation has its own struggles and benefits. Naming Zifnab similarly to other characters across franchises and across legalities seems to be a running joke for the authors and their audience (see also **Reception**).

When asked why exactly Zifnab makes so many pop-culture references to fantasy media, science fiction media, and popular media in general, Hickman replied: "I like to think that Zifnab is very well read." (Hickman "Fizban/Zifnab/Paladine complaints") This reinforces my interpretation of Zifnab being a character that is meant to be from our world, the actual world. This reply from Hickman further demonstrates my point through the epitext as well as the text; Zifnab is a joke character, yes, but the humor doubles as a way to foreshadow and eventually reveal the true nature of the possible world scenario of this fantasy and dystopia story that is *The Death Gate Cycle*. Here we have a character that combines the use of intertextual references and references to the actual world in order to first comment upon the genre history of fantasy and second as a social commentary upon the "future" that is the "now". The reply that he is "very well read" is also a fun and clever way to stay in character and not break the readers' immersion in the world of *The Death Gate Cycle*. As Ryan's theory of possible worlds declares, we interact with these worlds by pretending they are actual worlds in and of themselves, even though they are nonactual.

Margaret Weis' first experience with fantasy books were J. R. R. Tolkien's in the sixties, further evidencing that the intertextual references to his work, as well as the mentioned hypertextual similarity *The Death Gate Cycle* bears with Tolkien's writings, are likely intentional.

> I read [J.R.R.] Tolkien in the Sixties when that whole phenomenon swept across the country with the hippies and everything else. Of course, I loved it. We all did. But after Tolkien, there wasn't much else out there. So I read Tolkien, and that was it. I didn't read anything else. I went back to the

> classics. I'm a big fan of Dickens and Jane Austen, and that was pretty much what I read. (Ward “Margaret Weis: Dragon Team Player”)

I also know that Hickman has mentioned Tolkien’s Middle-earth directly before. (Weis and Hickman *Dragonlance: The Annotated Legends* 458) As was mentioned in the chapter on **Architextuality: Fantasy**, *The Death Gate Cycle* is written as if it is a scholarly document, and so is Tolkien’s *The Fellowship of the Ring* and other such works in that franchise. Though, the many intertextual references to Gandalf and to Smaug that were made by the character Zifnab did not actually need paratextual proof to cement their validity as an intended reference. But this backs up my claim that the hypertextual likeness may be directly influenced by *The Fellowship of the Ring*. It should be noted that neither Weis nor Hickman have admitted to any directly intentional hypertextual connection between *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Death Gate Cycle*. Had they, my proposal would just have been a fact and not an interpretation. For now, I only propose—albeit strongly—that Weis and Hickman have found themselves inspired—though perhaps not consciously—by Tolkien’s famous work. Admittedly, Weis did not mention any direct attempts to parody Tolkien’s work when she was asked how the classics influenced her writing style.

On that note, I would like to briefly touch on the point of hypertextuality in regard to that same interview with Margaret Weis, seeing as, as mentioned, Weis did most of the writing while Hickman did the background work:

> [Charles] Dickens for characterization. I go to Dickens to study how he gave us people that have lived for so many years in our minds. We all know them. You just say "scrooge," and the word conjures up the image of Scrooge. Even if you've never seen the movies. If you read Dickens, his descriptions and the way he used characters and how he wrote his characters -- I study him.
>
> Alexandre Dumas -- ***The Three Musketeers***. I loved the Musketeer books as a girl. Dumas for adventure and blending humor with tension.
>
> Jane Austen -- I think her women. Everyone says, "Oh, well, she's a romance writer." Austen's women are so… They think and feel like women. I think that's what she brought to us through the centuries -- you

> can really empathize with her women, and they are strong in their societies. Even the heroines who are kind of weak have their own inner strength. The way they're dealing with their society and the situations that they're brought -- I think that's what fascinates us about Jane Austin. We really can feel and empathize with here heroines. (Ward "Margaret Weis: Dragon Team Player")

This is a direct admittance of Weis' attempts at hypertextuality in her writing. I did not notice any of these influences in her writing in *The Death Gate Cycle* as I was reading the series. So, this was an intended style of hypertextuality that I would have otherwise completely missed had I not dived into the epitext. Admittedly, now that I have read this interview with Margaret Weis, I can see what she means: The characters of *The Death Gate Cycle* are memorable, there is a definite blend of tension and humor where you will read Haplo's secret undercover mission in one chapter and in the next chapter you read Zifnab's seemingly incompetent bumbling around, and the female characters have their own distinct flaws that make them special and diverse from one another.

My study of the epitext surrounding *The Death Gate Cycle* has been very informative. Hickman is very open about his religious beliefs and how he views the hero's journey and incorporates it all into his writing. Which explains some of the biblical references made by Zifnab in the novels. On that note, Zifnab is an archetypal character that Weis and Hickman like to insert into all of their stories. When asked why Zifnab makes so many pop-culture references, Hickman replied: "I like to think that Zifnab is very well read." (Hickman "Fizban/Zifnab/Paladine complaints") A cheeky reply concerning a character that combines the use of intertextual references and references to the actual world in order to first comment upon the genre history of fantasy and second as a social commentary on society at the time of the novels' publication. Both authors have admittedly read Tolkien, which I surmise is the reason their series resembles his in the hypertextual sense. I also discovered certain other authors that apparently Weis attempted to parody in her own writing—Dickens, Dumas, and Austen—in order to create her own personal combination of what she considers good writing.

Reception

Finally, I would like to briefly comment on the reader reviews of *The Death Gate Cycle* with the intention of further discussing the reader effect concerning these aspects of the series that I have so far analyzed: the reader effect of the genre discourse (architextuality) and the intertextual references. I am going to be looking at a few select reader reviews on *Goodreads* as representative of the general reader effect of this series.

There is a recurring theme of readers who describe the series as breaking away from the usual fantasy genre norms in the four- and five-star reviews of *Dragon Wing* on *Goodreads*.

> Let me say this, if you think 'oh no it's just another fantasy series', think again. Yeah it sure seems that way, till you get further in... and you start realizing some of the plot, and the timeline... just WHEN it happens will interest you! (Jennifer Troike)
>
> The Death Gate Cycle is epic fantasy but the nature of the worlds allows the introduction of tropes from post-apocalyptic and science fiction, injecting much-needed originality into the genre. It makes for one of the more underrated epic fantasy series in my opinion. (H.P.)
>
> This is certainly an example of 'thinking out of the box' as far as world building is concerned. (Dirk Grobbelaar)
>
> *Dragon Wing*, tosses you into a new fantasy world that is so unique and innovative, quite literally. (Joey Nguyen)
>
> If you are in the market for a satisfying high adventure story filled with a unique take on classic fantasy tropes then look no further. (David Woolridge)

Many of these reviews are written by readers who had already read the series from beginning to end, that is, all seven novels, while some are only referring to the first novel. But the recurring theme and general consensus here is that the dystopian elements of *The Death Gate Cycle* intrigue a certain audience of fantasy readers who are, evidently, happy to see a dystopian subversion of the fantasy genre.

Zifnab’s first appearance is in the second novel of the series, *Elven Star*, and the reviews become a lot more divisive on his character. I looked at different reviews, from one to five stars. There are readers who absolutely love him:

> Zifnab is the best of all crazy mages the Weis-Hickman duo ever came up with. better than fizban, and definitely far funnier than gandalf the grey. (Lurino)
>
> We get to meet Zifnab, a character who can't quite be defined. (Is he a wizard? A demigod? A crazy old man?) Zifnab was my favorite part of the book. His references to modern civilization and other wizards (Gandalf, Merlin, the Millennium Falcon, ...) baffled the characters he was talking to, but they made me laugh out loud. (Heidi)
>
> Seriously, I laughed so much whenever that mad wizard was on screen. 10/10 for the references not only to Dragonlance but other fantasy and sci-fi series as well as the modern world. (Stephanie Carr)

And there are readers who strongly dislike him:

> Zifnab character. I hated him. (Arminion)
>
> I'm told that Zifnab is pretty much an inside-joke type nod to a character from the Dragonlance books, and he was a big mistake, as far as I'm concerned. He added nothing except asshattery, and his constant real-earth pop culture references were not cute, funny, or endearing; they were merely stupid. I could maybe almost forgive it if real earth actually came into the picture at some point, but apparently it doesn't, so there's absolutely no excuse (kingshearte)
>
> the character of Zifnab was just annoying. (Darin)

I have chosen to present these examples of polar opposite reader reactions to Zifnab in order to talk about the reader effect of making all of these intertextual references. Allow me to further discuss these in the following paragraph:

This is a pretty good example of something author Brandon Sanderson explains in his writing lectures as the number of things that readers will let an author get away with:

> And this will also depend on your genre, right? And unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, how famous you are. Let me explain. Readers going into a book are going to come into it willing to give you a certain amount of leeway. If they have read previous books by you that have had excellent payoffs by the end of that book, then, they will give you longer to

> establish your introduction, because they know the payoff will be worth it. This is the advantage you get when you release a number of books […] And, it's like, every reader has a certain number of—like a threshold of crap they will let an author get away with, right? And everyone's threshold is different, and the things they count as crap that they have to let the author get away with is different based on the individual. (Brandon Sanderson "Writing Tips—Introductions: How Long is Too Long?" 1:30-2:55)

Interestingly, one reviewer who hates Zifnab in his first appearance would, in their own words, be pleased to know that his references actually have a payoff in one of the later novels in the series (kingshearte). But as Sanderson explains here, there is a threshold to the things that a reader will consider annoying and the types of things that a reader will find annoying vary from person to person (Brandon Sanderson ibid.). The reader effect here is that readers who had previously read and enjoyed the *Dragonlance* novels were more likely willing to give authors Weis and Hickman more leeway with the Zifnab character. And then there are readers, like me, who had not previously read any of *Dragonlance* but had read *The Lord of the Rings* and played *Dungeons & Dragons*, who therefore still had the intertextual foreknowledge to find Zifnab funny. The divisiveness on the character of Zifnab seems to be borne out of individual readers' foreknowledge of the fantasy genre and, *naturally*, individual readers' personal tastes. Which is not all that surprising, but I felt it needed to be addressed, as banal as the explanation seems.

To sum up, the dystopian approach to genre history that Weis and Hickman have taken in *The Death Gate Cycle* have indeed been met with some satisfactory reception here and there from readers—including myself. I admit, my reader bias has clouded my reading of the reviews page, as I found myself more inclined towards going through the reviews with higher ratings. However, as with all things, not all of Weis' and Hickman's choices have been met with unanimous applause. There are risks to including a character like Zifnab who makes constant intertextual and real-world references in your story. The risk is that to fantasy newcomers, his character will be more likely met with annoyance. And if you do not already suspect that the world of *The Death Gate Cycle* is a dystopian version of our world, you will not be likely to see Zifnab as a nod towards that idea. So, if

you are lacking in intertextual foreknowledge of the fantasy and sci-fi genres and you do not expect this character's madness to get a rewarding payoff in the story later on, you will most likely hate this character and these references. That is a risk that Weis and Hickman took when they included him. But it is a risk that has paid off for the readers that do in fact come into the series with the foreknowledge needed to understand Zifnab's jokes and references, and for the readers who suspect that the references to our culture from the actual world may be something of an oblique hint to the dystopian aspect of the worldbuilding.

Discussion

"I must pause here for cheering" (Weis and Hickman *Dragon Wing* 57) is the title I chose for this study, out of many discarded titles. This study began as a newly discovered obsession with a fantasy dystopian series of novels that I found sitting on a dusty bookshelf inside a thrift store. I had been reading a number of frankly difficult and boring literary books for my university classes, and I was beginning to wonder if I even enjoyed reading anymore. Maybe cinema, television, social media, and video games truly were killing the book industry, and maybe elitist academics were just too stubborn to let it die. Then I read *Dragon Wing* for the first time, and I rediscovered my love of books. *Dragon Wing* had wit, excitement, intrigue, and it had sections that actually made me laugh out loud for several minutes. It was actually *entertaining*. I had not even finished reading the first book before I ordered a shipment of the other six novels in the series. And so, I made it the object of my study in this, my final paper, my Master Thesis. Here I am, writing the discussion—the prelude to the final conclusion on this genre study. *I must pause here for cheering.* Just a moment. Because what follows may just be the most difficult part to write. It is time to summarize the results of my studies and to interpret my findings.

The thesis statement of my study has been as follows: To examine the "future"—and therefore the "now"—that the novels are commenting upon, and to examine how this series approaches genre history using transtextual references. Now that the analysis has examined these in relation to *The Death Gate Cycle* by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman, it is time to finally discuss the overall findings of my study. What did my examination of the dystopian and fantastical social commentary in *The Death Gate Cycle*

find? And what did my analysis of the transtextual references in *The Death Gate Cycle* conclude? And how do these two things intersect with each other? First, a brief overview of my findings, before I get into the finer details of my analysis.

The combination of these twofold research questions has connected the analysis chapters and the theory application thusly: The **Intertextuality Analysis** spans over both an analysis of the architextuality of the fantasy genre references and science fiction genre references, and the conclusion I came to as to why the intertextuality in *The Death Gate Cycle* is so important is that it foreshadows the dystopian element of the novels. Then the **Possible Worlds Analysis** began in the middle of the chapter on the analysis of the dystopian nature of the novel series. Here, I examined and discussed various topics of social commentary that are brought up in the series as a whole, though mostly the ones that I felt had very strong connections to the actual world. I found that no matter what topic Weis and Hickman tackled through the lens of fantasy and dystopian storytelling, they always retained a uniquely American or Western point of view—and, in some cases, a uniquely white American point of view. My examination of the **Epitext** that surrounded the text also concluded in much the same way that their point of view on these topics also seems heavily influenced by their religious backgrounds, for instance. And finally, for a bit of further examination of the reader effect concerning the architextuality of the combined fantasy and dystopian elements, as well as the reader effect concerning the intertextual references made by Zifnab, I briefly looked at some reader reviews on Goodreads. In **Reception**, I looked at some 5- and 4-star reviews and found that they tended to favor the subversion of fantasy genre conventions with the inclusion of dystopian worldbuilding. I also looked at reviews ranging from 1 to 5 stars with regards to Zifnab's first appearance in the series, which affected readers in two divisive ways; it was either love or hate, high praise or annoyance. But allow me to go more in-depth with the findings of my analysis concerning the **Intertextuality Analysis** and the **Possible Worlds Analysis**:

On the hypertextual level, *The Death Gate Cycle* parodies Tolkien's work by writing the series on the pretense that it is a scholarly document that details how these split worlds are connected and later how the worlds are then altered by the events of the series. It pretends to be a reconstruction of the events based on journals written by the

series' main characters. Both Weis and Hickman have read Tolkien's work, further evidencing that the hypertextual similarity *The Death Gate Cycle* bears with Tolkien's writings are likely intentional, as I mentioned in **Epitext**. Further, writing the series like this enhances reader immersion as it works along with the pretense that the reader is under while reading, which is that this nonactual world functions as its own actual world. We simply pretend that it is real, according to possible worlds theory. This is linked to the series' dystopian nature, as writing the series in the past tense under the pretense that it is a scholarly document about a series of events concerning Death Gate, its creation, and its destruction, and how these are linked to the history of the world of *The Death Gate Cycle*.

Further, on the intertextual level, *The Death Gate Cycle* references many pop culture phenomena through the character of Zifnab. References to Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, the *Dungeons & Dragons* tabletop roleplaying game, and the *Dragonlance* series are mentioned in the analysis chapter **Architextuality: Fantasy**. This presupposes that the target audience is somewhat familiar with fantasy literature, fantasy movies, and fantasy gaming—a high risk high reward choice made by the authors, as not all readers are as amused by these references as others, due to personal tastes but also due to a lack of devotion to the fantasy genre (see **Reception**). These fantasy references are also linked to the series' dystopian nature. Though they may break the reader immersion in the first book that Zifnab appears, they are supposed to foreshadow a greater reveal about the nature of the world of *The Death Gate Cycle* later on. A payoff that may come too late for some readers.

Additionally, Zifnab also makes intertextual references to other media, such as *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, James Bond, and to real world phenomena outside of traditional textuality. One very memorable scene where Zifnab makes a reference to James Bond is the scene where he reveals who he truly is and what his role was during the Sundering of the original Earth, the one *we* know from the actual world (following a nuclear holocaust that hurled the world into an Age of Dust which destroyed all science and brought back magic). The experience of having watched the Earth be destroyed and living on with that memory for so many years has driven Zifnab mad. In **Epitext**, I found that, according to Hickman, the reason Zifnab makes so many references is because he is "well read" in

popular Earth culture from our time—at the time of publication, around the 1990s. (Hickman "Fizban/Zifnab/Paladine complaints") In the beginning of my **Possible Worlds Analysis**, I discussed how Zifnab makes references to the *old* world, which to the reader would be the *real* world. It is a beautifully complex use of intertextuality that weaves it together with the series' greater narrative, worldbuilding, and also with its themes and social commentaries—while still being a nod to readers who are as well versed in popular fantasy and science fiction media as Weis and Hickman are. As such, the character Zifnab, even though he does not appear until the second book in the series, permeates so much of the analysis. Genette's theory of transtextuality has been a great tool for me to distinguish hypertextual and intertextual references from real world references and allusions.

So, my analysis moved on to the **Possible Worlds Analysis** of the series, which mostly used Ryan's theory of how possible worlds theory relates to how a reader contextualizes the stories they read by seeing it as a fictional world that is possible but not actual. The worlds of *The Death Gate Cycle* have then been analyzed as such: As narratives that, using fantasy and dystopian genre tropes, comment on American and Western society at the time of publication. This analysis begins by ending the analysis of Zifnab's character and his jokes about the old Earth—that is, that some of his jokes are not intertextual but simply mentions of real-world events, ideas, and phenomena such as all-you-can-eat buffets, planes, NASA, breathing exercises, nuclear reactors, bread boxes, Texas, Berlin 1948, cigarettes, and *Jeopardy*. These add to the foreshadowing of the dystopian nature of the world of *The Death Gate Cycle*. That is where the analysis moves on from textuality into social commentary, that is, the possible worlds analysis, and Zifnab is left behind. My analysis moves on to the social commentary of the Mensch versus non-Mensch narrative in the series; In this possible future, the issue of superior versus inferior races still exists, even alluding to only a slightly different version of the language that was used in the past with a word like "Mensch," which is reminiscent of the same word that exists in both English, German, and Yiddish, but is also drawing allusions to the idea of the Übermensch, the idea of the superior race that was adopted into Nazi ideology. The next social commentary narrative is the fact that the world of *The Death Gate Cycle*, back when it was still the Earth, was changed by a nuclear holocaust.

A very recent anxiety in human history is the fear that came from the invention of the atom bomb, which science fiction and dystopian fiction is known to comment on. It is also a fear of science itself, of a science that continually evolves with no thought or care as to the consequences. Additionally, global warming social commentary rears its head right at the end of the seven-novel series with the concept of "Kicksey-warming." Another common trope in science fiction and dystopian genre media, as well as another very recent anxiety that humanity is still faced with. The world of *The Death Gate Cycle* has been destroyed many times over, resulting in dystopia after dystopia until the point in time where the story of the novel series begins. These narratives are used to remind the reader of these current trends in *our* time, at the time of the books' publication. They are not so much predictions as they are social commentaries on elements of 1990s American and Western society's anxieties.

The **Possible Worlds Analysis** moves on to further discuss the narrative surrounding the *Kicksey-winsey* and the dwarven oppression surrounding it. The text alludes to the actual world by having objects from our world, such as lamps, described as they would be in the world of *The Death Gate Cycle*. Descriptions like that prime the reader to the possible world aspect of the narrative. Readers will begin to ask themselves what relationship this world has with the actual world. The narrative of the Gegs (dwarves) who work on the Kicksey-winsey machine is a slavery narrative. The language used is reminiscent of the racist and religious rhetoric that has been used against slaves in the history of the actual world. It is also a dystopian social commentary that takes the idea of industrial indoctrination and takes it to its utmost extreme, in a form of religious indoctrination. The narrative here is clearly against religion and industry taken to such an extreme, likely due to working class anxieties in post-industrialization America, where unionizing is, to this day, heavily and sometimes illegally discouraged by major corporations. A warning not to worship false gods, and a playful social commentary for the readers who recognize exactly what this narrative is trying to tell them by mocking industrial and religious power structures in this narrative of unionizing against slavery and oppression. The same narrative also warns against educational oppression because this is the type of power structure that profits off of withholding education and language from a group of people. "We wouldn't be punishing him for being right, we'd be

punishing him for spreading it around" (Weis and Hickman *Dragon Wing* 262) says one of the characters who benefit from the oppression of his people, the dwarves. Very telling commentary here. Weis and Hickman were right to fear that, should all or any of these ideas be taken to their extremes, the result will be a form of slavery, oppression, and indoctrination. American employers today sadly still use intimidation tactics to discourage American workers from unionizing (Lafer and Loustanau "Fear at work: An inside account of how employers threaten, intimidate, and harass workers to stop them from exercising their right to collective bargaining", McNicholas et al. "Unlawful: U.S. employers are charged with violating federal law in 41.5% of all union election campaigns"), and religious institutions are, historically, no strangers to dishonest tactics of their own (Starr "Why Christians Were Denied Access To Their Bible For 1,000 Years").

The **Possible Worlds Analysis** then moves on to discuss other examples of social commentary on *Racism* in *The Death Gate Cycle*. At one point in the series' narrative, the dwarf Limbeck forbids the use of the word "Geg" to describe dwarves, to the annoyance of some dwarves, like his wife, who have used that work to describe themselves for years. But according to Limbeck, it is a derogatory word used by their slave masters to keep them in line (Weis and Hickman *The Hand of Chaos* 84). This, as I said, is a possible worlds commentary on the way the American Civil Rights Movement shifted from using the word "negroes" to the word "black" to the phrase "African American" to refer to themselves. (Martin "From Negro to Black to African American: The Power of Names and Naming") Weis and Hickman are both white, so that is likely affecting their perspective on how to write a narrative like this; Their stance is that the dwarves are right to seek mutual respect and liberation, but not through violence. I would guess that Weis and Hickman might not like groups like the Black Panther Party, who did not believe that nonviolent protests were the way towards true liberation for the black American people. I base this on the ideologies in the narratives about these dwarves. There are other slavery narratives in *The Death Gate Cycle*, but it is always the slavery of either human slaves at the hands of elven masters or dwarven slaves at the hands of elven masters. It is always the type of slavery that is based on race, not the type of slavery where a people of the same race enslave each other. Still, the narrative tries to make use

of these fantasy races, like elves, humans, and dwarves, in order to speak more generally on the discourse of racism, rather than indicating ethnicities or nationalities of people from the actual world. It is an attempt to create a more widely applicable and less controversial social commentary that condemns these types of racism and slavery. Of course, the American influences in the writing still stand out.

And finally, the **Possible Worlds Analysis** tackles a few of the other social commentaries the series makes on *Religion*. The religious ideology of *The Death Gate Cycle* is that God is inside all of us. We are not gods, and should not act with the power of gods, for we do not possess the wisdom of God. Death is a fact of life, and we should not fear it, for it will bring us peace, but we should also not worship it, for in the worship of death, we cannot properly appreciate life. Religious ignorance and religious indoctrination can cause suffering and despair but believing in a higher power can also be a relief and a support to us. Whether or not I agree with these ideas is, to me personally and to this study, slightly irrelevant. These are the religious ideologies of Weis and Hickman, according to the narrative and themes of *The Death Gate Cycle*. In my **Epitext** analysis, I confirmed that these are indeed their religious ideologies, especially Tracy Hickman's. Hickman has himself confirmed that his faith heavily influences his writing: "The gospel is my life; I write my life; ergo, my writing is a reflection of my faith." (Young "Tracy Hickman") His statements on the matter explain this fixation on God, especially his explanation of how he views the hero's journey as applicable to the gospel and to fantasy writing in general. An example of the hero's journey in *The Death Gate Cycle* would be the narrative of the character of Hugh. After Hugh dies in *Dragon Wing*, Hugh is brought back to life by use of the forbidden magic of necromancy. Only when he finally dies once more does he finally find peace again (Weis and Hickman *The Seventh Gate* 306)—though not before he has done his part in saving the world from total destruction. This is how the hero's journey works: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man." (Campbell 23) Hickman extends the idea of this monomyth, this hero's journey, to real life, as he believes it

parallels humanity's birth, life journey, and then return home to Christ. (Young "Tracy Hickman")

Some other aspects of the **Epitext** that I concluded on include the fact that Weis and Hickman have written novels for the *Dungeons & Dragons* roleplaying games' *Dragonlance* series, which is where they invented the character archetype of Fizban, the crazed wizard, who later inspired the character of Zifnab, the crazed wizard. Due to matters of legality, Weis and Hickman are not allowed to reuse the character of Fizban, so they have turned it into an in-joke by making a similar character with a name that is an anagram of the original character's name. In their future work, they continue to use this in-joke and introduce the character Zanfib in their *Starshield* series. It is a type of character that Weis and Hickman always try to include in their books, "regardless of how his name is spelled" as Hickman puts it. (The Gate Will Open "Author Quotes") They have also recently been involved in a lawsuit with the *Dungeons & Dragons* company TSR, which resulted in a story they were working on that is now completely unpublishable due to legal limitations. Clearly, publishing novels that are set in a universe which is officially owned by a corporation has its own struggles and benefits. Further on the **Epitext**, there were other hypertextual parodies and imitations behind the writing on Weis' part which I would not have noticed on my own in my analysis had she not admitted to it directly. She was apparently taking inspiration from Charles Dickens' character writing and descriptions, Alexandre Dumas' blend of humor and tension, and Jane Austen's heroines.

Finally, I have already mentioned the reader effects of the genre commentary of *The Death Gate Cycle* as well as the reader effects of the intertextual references where they were relevant to the discussion, though I do not touch upon them until my final chapter of analysis, **Reception**. As difficult as it is for me to read, personally, because I enjoy *The Death Gate Cycle* so much, not all of Weis' and Hickman's choices have been met with unanimous applause. They took a risk when they introduced the character of Zifnab who makes constant intertextual and real-world references. The risk is that to fantasy newcomers, his character will be more likely met with annoyance. And if you do not already suspect that the world of *The Death Gate Cycle* is a dystopian version of our world, you will not be likely to see Zifnab as a nod towards that idea. But it is a risk that

has paid off for the readers that do in fact come into the series with the foreknowledge needed to understand Zifnab's jokes and references. And it was a rewarding payoff for readers like me who suspected that the references to the actual world might have been a hint to the dystopian aspect of the worldbuilding.

Now, it is about time for my discussion to ask the *big* questions: What do my results mean? Why do they matter? What can't the results tell us? How does my master thesis fit into the canon of similar studies? And what actions should be taken up after this?

Gérard Genette's theory of transtextuality and Marie-Laure Ryan's possible worlds theory have been used as vehicles for analyzing and discussing how this series approaches genre using references, parody, and imitation, and how the fantasy dystopian narrative approaches social commentary in *The Death Gate Cycle*. And the breadth of the social commentary in this series is immense. It comments on religion, racism, slavery, industrialism, unionizing, science, war, and climate change from a 1990s American point of view. In terms of genre commentary, *The Death Gate Cycle* subverts the typical expectations for a Tolkienesque fantasy epic like this and turns it dystopian.

These results tell of a 1990s American culture filled with social anxieties that seep into genre fiction in the way of narrative ideologemes. Fantasy is often regarded as escapism. Some may understand the idea of escapism as an avoidance of the problems of reality. Indeed, that is also what escapism is, but instead of avoiding these socio-political anxieties of the modern Western world, often, escapism allows writers and readers to take up these issues and come up with answers for them in a fictional environment—or in a nonactual possible world, if you will. That is, unionizing actually works in this story, against all odds. Just as an example.

The scope of my thesis work has been laser focused on the transtextuality and possible worlds social commentary of the series which has resulted in an analysis that is a bit disjointed from the plot, worldbuilding, and characters of the series overall—but that is no accident. Because this series is *not* a work of literary fiction. It is very distinctly genre fiction. As I mentioned in the theory section on **Architextuality (or Genre History)**, genre fiction is "the kind of story that offers readers more or less what they would expect upon the basis of having read similar books before" (Baldick "genre

fiction”). And as evidenced by the brief **Reception** analysis chapter, readers go into *The Death Gate Cycle* expecting a fantasy story. This fact is also what allows Weis and Hickman to make so many intertextual references to other fantasy media such as *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Dragonlance*, and *Dungeons & Dragons* using the character of Zifnab. There is an expectation here that readers have the intertextual foreknowledge of having consumed similar fantasy stories before. Which is likely also why Weis and Hickman decided to subvert expectations by adding the dystopian element to their fantasy series; So that the fantasy genre does not go stale.

Richard C. West wrote an article on the history of fantasy literature in 2014, in which part of his concluding statement was: “I look forward to hearing what you people have to say about where fantasy fits in the current state of things.” (30) That is an interesting research question and call to action to which I would gladly add the observations I have made in my master thesis. In his article “Where Fantasy Fits: The Importance of Being Tolkien,” West chronicles the fantasy scene before and after the emergence of Tolkien, seeing as *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* were so hugely influential to the literary fantasy genre. Tolkien was so hugely influential that his works have not escaped many an honorable mention in my study of *The Death Gate Cycle* as well. You will remember how in **Reception**, readers expressed joy at how *The Death Gate Cycle* plays with the genre conventions that fantasy books are so known for: It is not just another fantasy series (Jennifer Troike), it injects “much-needed originality into the genre” (H.P.), it is “unique and innovative” (Joey Nguyen), and it has “unique take on classic fantasy tropes” (David Woolridge). This is likely due to some of the tendencies in post-Tolkien fantasy books that West has observed:

> After Tolkien, the deluge. Publishers first looked for older fantasy novels that could be brought back into print. […] There are only so many old classics to reprint, so publishers sought new stories. Some of the first were imitations of Tolkien. They became known as Tol- clones. Let's just say that some were more successful than others. […] For a time any fantasy novel that came out was advertised as "in the tradition of Tolkien," whether or not it bore much similarity to Tolkien's mode. (West 25-26)

Perhaps it is this genre history of "Tol-clones" that inspired such reviews, reviews that tire of stale Tolkien imitations. It is likely also the reason as to why *I* was so alert to the similarities between *The Death Gate Cycle* and Tolkien's work in terms of hypertextuality in my analysis.

As for West's question, as to where fantasy currently fits, I would like to instead answer an adjoining question of my own: Where does *The Death Gate Cycle* fit into fantasy? As West writes, the genre of fantasy is more widely respected and is hugely popular nowadays. (30) West wrote so in 2014, and we are currently counting 2021. *The Death Gate Cycle* was published around 1990 to 1994, before the emergence of the hugely popular fantasy franchise kingpin *Harry Potter* by J. K. Rowling, for example. (Tangentially, I imagine Dumbledore may have gotten a joking mention by Zifnab in *The Death Gate Cycle* if *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* had only come out a few years earlier.) Meanwhile, *The Death Gate Cycle* remains, as reviewers would pen it, "underrated." (H.P.) Though, notably, *The Death Gate Cycle* had a videogame adaptation, *Death Gate*, released in 1994 on an operating system that was before my time. The series is not so underrated that nobody has heard of it, but it is not so hugely popular or influential as Tolkien's or Rowling's works. It is as I said in my introduction to this thesis: I cannot justify the writing of this study on the basis of *The Death Gate Cycle*'s popularity or overall cultural significance. This particular work is more a product of its culture, rather than having any great influence or impact upon it. *That* is where *The Death Gate Cycle* fits into the fantasy genre, even as innovative as it is.

What actions should be taken up after this study? Genre studies are, indubitably, a never-ending academic endeavor. There is an endless corpus of work for future academics to sink their teeth into. West's is only one of many articles on the topic of fantasy literature, Gérard Genette's theory of transtextuality is just one of many branches from the study of intertextuality, and Marie-Laure Ryan's possible worlds theory is but one of the theories one can apply to analyze the reader effect of fictional stories. The corpus of work on fantasy and dystopian genre studies and on social commentary possible worlds literature should *and* will be expanded upon. That also places my study into a sea of many, into which it may fall into obscurity. But I hold my head high, for I believe in the value of my work because I believe in the value of Genette's and Ryans'

theories of analysis as well as in the value of *The Death Gate Cycle* as a byproduct of its culture.

I recommend following studies to remember the purpose of intertextual references in narratives such as this: To what ends do they serve? Are they an in-joke for fans who have the intertextual foreknowledge, and do they serve to foreshadow the overall narrative of the story, just as they did in *The Death Gate Cycle*? I also recommend following studies to remember that architextual discourse on genre is only possible with the intertextual foreknowledge of said genres. And finally, I recommend following studies to recall the theorized purpose of possible world narratives: That stories are fabrications made by human beings in response to something, be it another text, work of art, some area of discourse, or life in general. We interpret stories because stories are a way to organize the human experience. (Ryan 647)

Conclusion

The goal of my analysis of *The Death Gate Cycle* was twofold: To examine the "future"—and therefore the "now"—that the novels are commenting upon, and to examine how this series approaches genre history using transtextual references. I have therefore made a genre study of *The Death Gate Cycle* with a combination of Gérard Genette's transtextual theory and Marie-Laure Ryan's possible worlds theory in my analysis. Firstly, the authors make references to other texts in the form of intertextuality and hypertextuality, which is both commenting on the fantasy and dystopian genre while simultaneously working in duality with the authors' social commentary. Secondly, the authors have created a dystopian future in order to comment on the present day at the time of writing. These two aspects of the writing work in duality with each other, strengthening the sum of their parts. The **Intertextuality Analysis** spans over both an analysis of the architextuality of the fantasy genre references and science fiction genre references, and the conclusion I came to as to why the intertextuality in *The Death Gate Cycle* is so important is that it foreshadows the dystopian element of the novels. Then the **Possible Worlds Analysis** began in the middle of the chapter on the analysis of the dystopian nature of the novel series. Here, I examined and discussed various topics of social commentary that are brought up in the series as a whole, though mostly the ones that I felt had very strong connections to the actual world. I found that no matter what

topic Weis and Hickman tackled through the lens of fantasy and dystopian storytelling, they always retained a uniquely American or Western point of view—and, in some cases, a uniquely white American point of view. Additionally, I studied the epitext surrounding the series, such as author interviews, as further proof of my intertextual and hypertextual arguments, as well as a supporting analysis of the contexts of this series' narratives. My examination of the epitext that surrounded the text also concluded in much the same way: The authors' point of view on these topics also seems heavily influenced by their religious backgrounds, for instance. I also briefly touched on the reader effect of the architextuality and the intertextuality of *The Death Gate Cycle*. I selected excerpts from a few community reviews by readers on *Goodreads* to represent some of the tendencies in reader's receptions of these aspects of the series. In **Reception**, I looked at some 5- and 4-star reviews and found that they tended to favor the subversion of fantasy genre conventions with the inclusion of dystopian worldbuilding. I also looked at reviews ranging from 1 to 5 stars with regards to Zifnab's first appearance in the series, which affected readers in two divisive ways; it was either love or hate, high praise or annoyance. See my **Discussion** for a more in-depth summary of the results and implications of the findings of my analysis—as well as how my study connects to related genre studies.

So, what is the main conclusion of my study, now that I have thoroughly examined the "future"—and therefore the "now"—that the novels are commenting upon, and how this series approaches genre history using transtextual references? *The Death Gate Cycle* did some extraordinary things with intertextuality and with a fantastical dystopian possible worlds narrative. It uses these to comment on religion, racism, slavery, industrialism, unionizing, science, war, and climate change from a 1990s American point of view. The series also uses these as a genre commentary by *s*ubverting the typical expectations for a Tolkienesque fantasy epic and turning it dystopian. It completely took me by surprise, and I was enthused the whole way through the seven novels-long series. I quoted Oscar Wilde in my introduction to this study: "We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it. The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely. All art is quite useless." (Wilde 4) I chose this quote because *The Death Gate Cycle* is more a product of its culture, rather than having had

any great influence or impact upon it. It was not the next *The Lord of the Rings* or *Harry Potter*, in that it did not change public perception of fantasy literature in any way. It is considered by fans to be an underrated fantasy series—an obscure 1990s gem in an oversaturated market that pumps out fantasy series after fantasy series. It was not *The Lord of the Rings* or *Harry Potter*; It was *The Death Gate Cycle*. And I admire it intensely for what it is.

I must pause here for cheering.

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